

'The daughter was too young and innocent to understand either her adolescence or her destiny. Having been brought up as a son for years, she now considered herself a man . . . She believed that she would grow a moustache when she got married.'

Folktales are the collective memories of people, handed down from one generation to another. But often, this process of handing down stops the evolution of these folktales. Vijai Dan Detha, one of India's most iconic and iconoclastic writers, not only puts these mostly oral stories into words, he also weaves contemporary issues into them and gives them renewed relevance. His stories speak of alternative ways of life and, sometimes, they speak out for the most common victims of feudal societies—women.

In 'A New Life', two women, Teeja and Beeja, are married to each other to satisfy the whim of an unbending father. They realize the mistake that they have been inadvertently forced into, but they also understand that this is the ideal union for them and, with the help of the ghost chieftain, build a new life for themselves. In 'The Crow's Way' the selfishness of a husband, in-laws and other benefactors convinces a young wife that the only true human relationship is the one between a prostitute and her customer. 'Discretion' is the story of a she-jackal who is more virtuous than Sita but unwittingly cheats on her husband with the sun and the moon.

The stories in *New Life*, many of them path-breaking in Indian writing, are refreshingly free of stereotypes. Detha's deep understanding of human relationships and his matter-of-fact engagement with unconventional themes make this an unforgettable collection.

Cover painting courtesy
Lalit Kala Academy

read more



ISBN 0-14-310077-7



9 780143 100775

Rs 225

www.penguinbooksindia.com

Fiction

VIJAI DAN DETHA



New Life

SELECTED STORIES



PENGUIN BOOKS
NEW LIFE

Vijai Dan Detha, affectionately known as 'Bijji' to his friends and acquaintances, has written more than 800 short stories in Hindi and Rajasthani. He works for the Rupayan Sansthan, an institute that he started with Komal Kothari to support the folk art forms of Rajasthan. Many of his stories and novels have been adapted for the stage and the screen including *Charandas Chor*, a play directed by Habib Tanveer; and *Paheli*, a film directed by Amol Palekar.

Vijai Dan Detha was awarded the Padma Shri in 2007.

*

Mridul Bhasin, a Fulbright scholar, holds a doctorate in Negro folktales and is a bilingual writer with a passion for literature, arts and crafts. She has co-authored a coffee table book on the performing arts of Rajasthan and a book on the crafts of the state. She also writes for newspapers and design magazines.

Kailash Kabeer did his M.Com. from Jaswant College in Jodhpur. He has translated Ramanujam's *Folktales of India* which was published by NBT. He also writes poetry.

Vandana R. Singh is an author, translator and editor. She is currently working with the NCERT as consultant editor. She is also a consultant to NGOs for gender studies, media, education, translation, English language teaching and communication skills.

New Life

Selected Stories

VIJAI DAN DETHA'

Translated and edited by

Mridul Bhasin

Kailash Kabeer

Vandana R. Singh



PENGUIN BOOKS

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ix
TRANSLATOR'S NOTE	xi

NEW LIFE 1

DISCRETION 35

THE CROW'S WAY 40

THE SLOUGH 68

THE DILEMMA 98

LAJWANTI, THE SHY WOMAN 121

THE UNRESOLVED QUESTION 131

TO EACH HIS OWN MORALITY 153

KABEER 185

THE QUEEN OF THE NIGHT'S ANGER 203

acknowledgements

During the two years I was busy translating stories by Bijji, I had excellent support from people around me. I wish to thank my associates and friends for their help and patience. I am very thankful to Naresh Maghani, a most intelligent and hardworking computer resource person, for typing and retyping the drafts of the translations any number of times without complaint. I could not have completed the final draft without his help. Roberta Bhasin, my sister-in-law, who is an accomplished writer and public relations expert, has been instrumental in making lots of improvements in the translation. She was always ready with a better yet simpler word—and like the true professional that she is, edited my work down to the minutest detail.

It may seem a formality, but I wish to express my gratitude to my husband Pramod Bhasin who has always helped me to try new things and broaden my horizons.

November 2007
New Delhi

Mridul Bhasin

translator's note

Rajasthani folktales form the basis of litterateur Vijai Dan Detha's creative writing. Like all folktales, these are an expression of the collective memories of people who lived in simple though feudal times. Most of the stories deal with the universal theme of man-woman relations and with the fact that women have suffered discrimination in every age and time. Bijji, as the writer is lovingly known, has sourced the folktales from the villages of Rajasthan. The majority of the Indian population lives in the countryside. Even today, one can find these tales being told in chaupals in the interiors of Rajasthan. The stories are unique in the way they reveal the psyche of rural women whose silence is taken to be ignorance. The way the women fight against injustice reveals their inner strength. The stories put these women on equal footing with urban women. This also makes the stories outstanding as the writer has chosen to portray a segment that has been ignored in modern literature.

As the women have remained unseen, one wonders if they have been presumed to be unimportant from a literary standpoint. This also brings to the fore the fact that not many of our writers or our readers know much about rural women. Though generalizations are not always befitting, one cannot help noticing the fact that regional literature carries the burden of portraying the poor as well as women. Translation

of such literature in English would, perhaps, help to nullify the unstated presumption that regional characters are regional only. In these stories, the lines dividing regional, national and international literature disappear.

Bijji, Padma Shree and Sahitya Akademi Award winner, has used the folktales of Rajasthan the way Joel Chandler Harris, the American writer of the Reconstruction era, used his Uncle Remus Tales. That is to say, only the skeleton of a tale has been adopted and the writer has used his creativity to give body to the folktales collected from various regions of the desert. The stories not only have beauty of language, they also have characterization and a dramatic locale. The stories have been developed to comment on the inequitable system of the day. They register a protest from the weakest section of Rajasthani feudal society—the women. Stories like ‘The Dilemma’ and ‘The Slough’ are so feminist in content that one is convinced that their growth records the fact that oral literature all over the world is the literature of protest. In Harris’s Uncle Remus Tales, the weakest of all animals, the rabbit, is the hero. He uses trickery and wit to triumph over bigger, stronger animals. It is obvious that the African slave found poetic justice in a weaker hero’s victory over the stronger animals. It is in this respect that Bijji’s stories too become a literature of protest. The difference is that here it is women who are victims of an unjust system.

There is a certain unity of subject matter, style and ethos in the stories chosen for this book. The characters stand in a distinctive cultural milieu. They have been given a context, they talk a certain dialect and though their lives are rural and limited in that sense, they are universal in content. A certain style of idiom popular in the rural areas of Rajasthan is used. Sentences are short and pregnant with meaning and there is a liberal use of proverbs. The descriptive sentences are followed by one-word adjectives or adjectival phrases. The tone is conversational and it links well with the narrative or the storytelling mode into which the narrator slips in

unobtrusively. In contrast with these, conversational paragraphs are more poetic, internally rhyming; they can be taken as the narrator’s observations or the character’s thoughts. They do not obstruct the flow of the story.

Such interjecting narratives show to the uninitiated that Rajasthani as a regional language has great potency and vigour. We find Lachchi, a Gujjar woman, using language that is infused with phrases common among Gujjars, the cattle-breeding and milk-selling community. This does not prevent her from being poetic or realistic, as the occasion demands. Bijji uses similes and metaphors that are consistent with the content of the story. With this literary device, the reader is made to enter an archaic albeit poetic world, vestiges of which can still be found in villages of Rajasthan today.

Bijji has recently finished a dictionary of Rajasthani proverbs that runs into several parts. Many of these sayings carry seeds of folktales and they are identifiable through them. This in itself shows the kind of grip he has over the Rajasthani dialect. As a creative writer Bijji has developed the crux of each tale, giving it a locale that combines timelessness with what is immediate, that is, elements specific to the modern context. The stories chosen for this book are oriented towards women and as such their problems are localized. Their import, however, is universal. It is amazing how the feminine characters in the stories speak a regional language, wear clothes that are specific to the region, and lead tradition bound lives. Yet their minds, even in their restraining surroundings, are free. They ponder over their status and the double standards men impose upon them. Their revolt is all the more telling in that they have no social support. Their protests are self-destructive: there are no alternatives available. The women in these stories are universal for intellectually they speak a universal language. Likewise, their concerns are universal, going beyond the boundaries of time and space.

When we talk of universality of regional characters, we are reminded of the most poetic and almost pantheistic

narrations of Bijji wherein nature in the desert scenario, even humble bushes, is given a singular description. Nature forms a live backdrop for human drama, the turbulence in the human psyche. Parallels are drawn between the natural and the human world. The poetic narration not only adds beauty to the stories, it also builds a vast canvas of natural phenomena upon which human activity takes place. Sometimes it highlights the paltry, insignificant nature of human endeavour and sometimes nature becomes a partner in action. The author uses nature to broaden the human drama, giving it connotations that transcend time and space. Thus the ghost in the story 'The Dilemma' witnesses strange natural phenomena like sudden darkening of the skies during a desert dust storm, a rainstorm and the beauty of nature in its different aspects. Like the ghost we wonder: is it the inner turbulence of the ghost lover or is it nature empathizing with his emotions? The whole description is so very gripping that the reader flows with it.

Definitely, Bijji's use of Rajasthani dialect and certain twists of phrase add a unique, individual character to the tales. More importantly, such a stylization provides a reference in chronology and history that is relevant to the character as well as to the reader. Yet this very venerable quality makes these tales difficult to translate. It has been a challenge for me as a translator not only to adhere to the content and the undercurrent of a particular sentence, but also to retain the original syntax as far as possible. While translating the tales from Hindi, one cannot but note the fact that English as spoken and written in the previously colonized world, is indeed quite different from the English spoken or written by the British. It is an established fact now that English has many faces all over the world and all these faces are as true to life as British English. The same is true about translation from a regional language to Indian English. To be true to the flavour of the regional language, the translator has to adopt various deviations to retain its indigenous flow. As a result, it may

seem convoluted to the reader at times.

The stories are as much a progression on the genre of folktales as they are full-grown literature. Almost all of them begin with a poetic piece, a narration by the poetic-minded storyteller. Throughout, one has a sense of their oral tradition. Bijji has retained the basics of the folk genre while adding touches of realism. Thus, the elements of fiction, folktale and fairytale coexist in these stories. As a translator one has to capture the flow of synergy to make one swim effortlessly with the shift the writer executes so deftly. Only when one is totally in sync with the spirit of the narrator is an effortless transliteration possible. Whether this has resulted in a good translation or not is yet to be judged by the reader.

Kailash Kabeer, who has done justice to the stories in his translation from Rajasthani to Hindi, helped me adhere to the text word for word, thus enabling me to retain the original flavour and essence of every tale. These elements make Bijji's fiction an ideal choice for translation, though it is not easy to translate the flavour and essence of a region like Rajasthan in that it is not only colourful, but old and historic as well. One important reason for retaining certain words in Rajasthani is that they explain cultural norms or customs. For example, Rajasthani names of items of clothing have been retained. What adds relevance to this is the fact that even today many of these norms and customs continue to exist in the villages of India.

As an eminent ethnologist and a lifelong friend of Bijji, Padma Bhushan Komal Kothari, said, whatever was enduring in the folktales has survived; the rest has been forgotten. The folktales that have survived always have some relevance to the present context. It is this universal context that made the writer choose a particular tale and develop it into a story. He has been careful to retain the local colour that comes naturally to him because for many generations his family has lived at Borunda, his ancestral village. The folk traditions of the region have seeped deep into his own lifestyle.

While working with Kailash Kabeer, the original translator of the stories from Rajasthani to Hindi, utmost care has been taken to retain this local colour. When a story so regional is translated, small shifts that seem subtle to an unwitting translator take away the essence—its very soul. Kailash Kabeer, an experienced translator, with his knowledge of Rajasthani language and ethos, has stood guard over every translation, to save the stories from any such misinterpretation.

Care has been taken to translate the content word for word. Where that has not been possible, the original has been retained. While rural customs may have common traits all over the world, regional and cultural norms sometimes present a challenge to a translator. In such situations, chances are that one finds a substitute, a parallel or a word close to the concept. It has been the translator's effort to maintain exactitude as far as possible. The tales retain an age-old charm of archaism that is well expressed through retention of qualities that are unique to an oral tradition. These are the qualities that make the stories universal. The writer has interpreted the folktales so deftly that his women can very well be compared to any women in the literary world in this genre. The seeds of the tales are regional, but the appeal is universal. Elements like the supernatural, animal characters, rural rhythms, and a way of life that is not dated, make them lovable and appealing to readers throughout the world.

Mridul Bhasin

o n e

new life

May the formless Kamdev, god of love, grant us two lives each!

Once upon a time there were two villages situated at a distance of forty-eight miles from each other. There lived two moneylenders of equal status and age in the two villages. Both were well known for their stinginess. Though living in two different villages, they remained close friends. It was a lucky coincidence that they got married on the same day. Both were married to two extremely beautiful girls who conceived at the same time. Happy with this, the friends promised each other that if one had a son and the other a daughter, the two children would be married to each other. So, the pregnancies of their wives brought hope and the promise of a future wedding.

The two friends, busy earning money, were completely oblivious of nature's whims. In the ninth month, each wife gave birth to a daughter under the same planet. Perhaps, under the pressure of the word given to his friend, or perhaps out of greed, one seth decided to play foul. Although he had a daughter, he announced the birth of a boy in the traditional way: by beating a copper plate. He sent a barber to his friend's village with this news. There were celebrations in the mansions of both the seths and molasses were distributed.

Initially, the mother presumed it was a joke between the friends. The reality of their daughter's sex couldn't remain hidden for long, she thought. As children, one can hardly

make out a girl from a boy. It is only with puberty that the difference between male and female starts becoming evident. But the father deliberately did not clarify the misunderstanding. He raised his daughter like a boy and dressed her in a dhoti, angarkhi and pugree. For a while it carried on as a joke. It was when the femininity of the girl became obvious and the father still did not change his stance that the mother got very worried.

One day, she tried to reason with him saying, 'How can you be blind to something that you see so clearly?'

Stammering, the husband replied, 'I'm not blind at all. I can see things happening in all the three worlds.'

The wife held her head in her hands and said, 'Can one who can see three worlds, not see his daughter's youthful bloom through the manly clothes she wears?'

The husband lied to his wife, saying, 'I have no time to waste on petty things.'

Ironically, the wife, who was used to addressing her husband as the boy's father did the same now and said, 'What madness is this? Your daughter is ready for marriage and you pass this deception off as a petty matter?'

'I have never refused the marriage. No one is as wise as I am! I settled the marriage of our child when she was still in your womb,' he said.

The wife came closer and asked, 'Your settlement will not work. How can a girl marry a girl?'

'What's in a marriage?' he answered. 'It is just a ceremony to be performed, but a promise I've given can't be broken till death.'

The wife was stunned. The seth was not joking. How could she show him a reality as plain as sunlight? Some things should need no explanation. But she thought she must speak up now; continued silence would be disastrous. Somehow she gathered the courage to say, 'You good man, how can your promise fulfil what she lacks physically. Just think of that. I didn't discuss this matter all these years because I thought it was all a joke.'

The husband said, 'I never do things in half measures. I will lead my son's marriage party with pomp and show. We will get a fabulous dowry. A man doesn't go back on his word. Why should I suffer a loss for what is nature's fault?'

The wife was in a quandary. Either he was still joking, or he was actually determined to stick to his word. This matter couldn't be left unsettled. Angry, she said, 'To hell with your gain and loss! What kind of a father are you? How will she cope with the lack of marital fulfillment in bed? Have you ever thought of this?'

The husband replied confidently, 'Of course, I have thought of that. Wise wives wait patiently for the husband when he goes abroad for long periods of time. If they get an incapable husband, they still manage to fill their wombs. A child widow too spends her time one way or the other. Our daughter has her own destiny and she too will manage.'

The wife was certain now that this was no joke. Her husband would not solve this problem he had created. Her daughter's face swam in front of her eyes. In a choked voice, she said, 'She's our own child. We can't burn her at the stake. If you get her married to another girl how will she manage? I cannot agree to such an evil plan.'

The husband replied irritably, 'Who needs your consent when mine is sufficient? If you create obstacles, I will kill myself. I would rather die than be untrue to my word. Don't you know how marital fulfillment is found in seths' families with an incapable husband? There is no use pretending to be innocent because everyone knows how your father's name has been carried forward. Yet, I turned a blind eye to all that and married you.'

The wife wasn't expecting such derision from her husband. The blood froze in her veins and she was struck dumb. Yes, everyone knew this. Her mother took any man she set eyes on. Her impotent father remained busy with his business while her mother crossed all barriers of status or position. A shoemaker was her lover and she made no bones about it.

He had a good physique and was handsome. The seth's wife had taken after her shoemaker father—she had the same face and the same walk. This rather sudden exposé unnerved her and she could barely stammer, 'Do as you wish.'

The husband realized that he had hit the nail on the head and this settled the matter once and for all. As it happened, the very next day was an auspicious one. His friend sent a message asking for the date of the marriage to be settled. The father accepted the message with enthusiasm, but the mother's heart was torn to pieces. However, she remained silent and tried to reconcile to the fact that her daughter would have to ultimately tackle her own destiny.

The daughter was too young and too innocent to understand either her adolescence or her destiny. Having been brought up as a son for years, she now considered herself a man. Though she did not particularly understand the meaning of marriage, she was happy at the novelty of the event.

She believed that she would grow a moustache when she got married. Her fingers itched to twirl her moustache. Her daughter's innocence filled the mother with impotent anger.

A girl her own age had once seen the seth's daughter bathing and she knew the reality of the situation. Till now, the friend had thought that the girl's parents were caught up in some mumbo-jumbo, but when they accepted the marriage offer, she decided to break her silence. Addressing the girl as 'elder sister', the friend took the girl to a room and tried to explain everything to her.

The girl interrupted her saying, 'Why do you call me "sister"? Why not the usual "brother"?''

The neighbour smiled, 'Because you are actually a sister to me. You silly girl, you are a woman and yet you dream of being a bridegroom? How long can you pretend to be a man without real manhood?'

'Why, I can continue to be so throughout my life. What is it that is lacking in me as a man? I have the dhoti, the angarkhi and the sixteen-hand-long pugree of a man,' she said.

The girl from the neighbourhood smiled and said, 'The sixteen-hand long pugree is no substitute for being a man. Say "no" to this marriage. Your youth itself desires a man. What will two women tied in marriage do together? In spite of having reached the right age to understand these things, why do you refuse to accept the truth?'

The simple daughter of the seth still didn't understand. She made a face and said, 'You're jealous of my beautiful bride. You're envious of my happiness.'

Embracing her, the other girl said, 'What can one do about someone as foolish as you? You'll understand only after making a mistake and then it will be too late. Your father is greedy for the dowry, but it's odd that even your mother didn't explain anything to you. How did her heart allow her to do such a strange thing?'

At this the daughter said impatiently, 'I'll run to mother and ask her everything. She'll not hide anything from me.'

'It would be better if she doesn't,' observed the neighbour.

The daughter went running to her mother and asked, 'Mother, a girl told me an amazing thing today—she said that I'm not a man, but only wear the clothes of a man. But why should I agree with her? I'm sure you'll tell me everything. That girl is a liar, isn't she? I told her to her face that she was jealous of my bride's beauty.'

The mother turned her face away and wiped her eyes. When she spoke, her voice was unsteady, 'Had that been true, wouldn't I have told you? The foolish girl must be joking.'

The daughter was now excited and spoke in a high-pitched voice, 'Let her carry on joking then. I won't be influenced by anyone. Even if I had been a woman, I wouldn't have said "no" to this marriage. It's all a matter of two hearts. If two women love each other why can't they be married?'

The mother made a subdued observation, 'Your father says so too.'

The daughter danced around saying, 'And can my father's

wisdom be questioned?’

The girl had asked her mother what she wanted to. What purpose would hanging around there serve! Snapping the long tail of the pugree she vanished with a spring in her step, leaving the mother standing there like a stone statue, somehow suppressing her tears, brooding silently.

Next day when the daughter met the friend, she reprimanded her and said that she wouldn’t be affected by what anyone said. Thumping her chest she further said, ‘Even if I had not been a man, I would still have married a woman. At least, we would have been easy on each other.’

The neighbour—who was in her second year of marriage—did not have children. She couldn’t stop laughing at such a silly idea. Trying to explain she said, ‘Your whole household seems to have lost their mental balance. You foolish girl, the two halves of a grindstone can strike each other all they want, nothing will come of it. You need a man to do a man’s job.’

‘Man is special, but grindstones feed the whole world. And, in any case, flour is ground in the grindstone, but lentils are just bruised,’ the girl said.

The neighbour couldn’t suppress her amusement. Clapping her hands, she laughed and said, ‘Now, don’t the two of you fall behind in bruising the lentils!’

Her laughter made the innocent girl shy. However, she asked with a forced laugh, ‘What’s wrong with bruising lentils?’

The neighbour muffled her laughter with her chunari and said, ‘Only time will answer that.’

‘You too must know something.’

‘Your marriage and mine cannot be compared,’ the neighbour said.

‘True, there can be no comparison between a king and a pauper. The kind of dowry I’m going to get, not even your ancestors could have dreamt of,’ the girl said.

The friend didn’t mind the insult. She pinched the simple girl’s cheeks and observed, ‘Don’t drag ancestors into this

nonsense. It’s impossible to make you understand.’

In fact, the seth’s daughter refused to understand anything on her own, and she couldn’t quite make out what others tried to explain to her. As the auspicious moment drew closer, she felt engulfed in waves of happiness. The day finally arrived. Amidst feasting with relatives, the marriage party got ready to go. Seven horses, eleven camels, and twenty well-decorated coaches formed the marriage party. The bridegroom’s father sat on a beige camel and the bridegroom sat in a coach drawn by special Nagauri bullocks.

Crossing villages and hamlets, trumpets blowing, the marriage party reached the village of the bride. A coconut was offered to the gods at the outskirts of the village. At dusk, after the ceremonies, the newly-weds sat under a canopy specially set up for them. Two soft, hennaed hands were joined together. Electricity flowed through their bodies at the touch—two strangers were now joined for life.

In the low light of the lamp, a pugree adorning his head, the bridegroom sat on the wedding bed waiting for the bride. When the night was half gone, he heard the tinkle of anklet bells, and the rustle of the bride’s clothes. With her face covered, the bride stopped outside the wedding chamber. A thousand buds blossomed in the young bridegroom’s heart.

When the bride hesitated before entering the room, her friends pushed her inside and shut the door. Taking one deliberate step after another she reached the bed and sat close to the groom. The groom removed the veil and looked at her face. The bride’s countenance revealed itself like the moon coming out from behind the clouds. The groom’s happiness was too much to be contained within the four walls of the wedding chamber. Softly moving his hands over her cheeks, he said, ‘I had heard praises of your beauty, but not even in my dreams did I anticipate so much of it.’

His bride’s pink lips moved, ‘You are no less handsome yourself. My beauty is nothing in comparison.’

The two of them looked at each other’s face drinking in

the beauty of the other. The women peeping through the chinks in the door were disappointed when they did not see what they had waited for. Finally giving up their vigil they hoped that physical desire would awaken once the newly-weds had looked at each other long enough.

On the second day, too, the same thing happened. Once again the women who were peeping through the chinks of the door of the bedroom got tired. When their delicate calves began to ache, they all left one by one. Shyness has its virtues, but what was the point in wasting two precious nights like this, they wondered? None of them was that young, but curiosity knows no age. One second may sometimes be as good as the whole night to satisfy the thirst of the eyes. Anyway, everybody to their own thirst and their own understanding.

The bride came to her in-laws' house. The groom's shyness persisted and there was no change in his behaviour. The bridegroom's mother worried endlessly. Even in humid Asoj (mid-September according to the Roman calendar), a cold shiver ran through her body when she thought about the oddity of the marriage. The seth sleeping next to her snored, but there was no sleep for her. God knows how the two girls must be struggling against the odds of the night. How would her daughter react when she came to know reality? Her innocent daughter did not understand anything. She had happily married and was at least made aware of the danger, but what about the poor bride who was completely unaware of the truth?

In the bedchamber, the oil lamp spread luminous light. The bride touched the tail of the groom's pugree and said, 'It's very humid in here. Why don't you take this off? I will fan you.'

Saying this she began fanning the husband. The groom said, 'The pugree is a man's special adornment. Manhood fades without it. If you insist, I would rather take off my angarkhi'.

He began undoing the lace of his angarkhi while the bride continued to fan him. As he took off the angarkhi, a look at her husband's bare chest drew a sudden shriek from the bride and she slumped on the bed. In a semi-conscious state she muttered, 'You too are a woman! Why this deceit with me?'

This was the first time that the husband's illusion had been shattered and with it she could see her entire life, spent in a man's clothes, unfolding like a scroll. Now she understood what the neighbour had been saying. How the ghost of illusion can turn a person blind and deaf! In such a state a person can neither see nor hear anything. Illusion only shows the image that one wants to see and reality becomes non-existent.

After so many years of deception, the bridegroom now wanted to know the truth. Like a deranged person, she tore off her pugree and dhoti. When she took off the bride's clothes too, reality stared her in the face and she was stunned. Why had she remained blind to the truth for so many years? Both the bodies were similar. The unconscious bride lay on the bed while her bridegroom stood next to the bed. Had such a drama ever been enacted since the beginning of creation?

Suddenly, on impulse, the bridegroom started shaking the unconscious bride repeatedly saying, 'Open your eyes. My illusion has vanished. I stand guilty, punish me.'

After some shaking, the bride opened her eyes and looked around, startled. The two girls cast in the same mould stared at each other. The so-called husband admitted to being guilty once again. She would be at peace only if the toughest punishment was given to her. She had invited the trouble, but the bride was totally innocent and had been punished for no fault of hers. The girl had been cheated. No amount of punishment would lessen the husband's guilt.

The bride was mature and sensible. She knew that sincere repentance is the most suitable punishment. She believed in her husband's innocence. In spite of her persistent refusal, the husband narrated the story of her life. She talked of how

her father had woven a web of falsehood and how her poor mother had tried in vain to avert the marriage.

After listening quietly, the bride said in a subdued voice, 'I have suffered the illusion only for seven days, but you have been under its spell for so many years. You have been wronged more than I have. Both of us have been struck by the same lightning. Now we have to pay the price for it together.'

'But I am guilty of performing the wedding rites. I am the one who must take the complete blame. You've been tricked into this,' the bridegroom said.

The bride interrupted impatiently, 'And you have been given equal punishment for no fault of yours.'

'I will not be absolved of this sin even after death,' said the bridegroom.

The bride touched the bridegroom's cheeks gently and said, 'Now we're going to sink or swim together.'

With tears rolling down her cheeks, the husband said, 'If I had done this knowingly, there was no hurdle to salvation, but the guilt of deceit is hounding me. In a different situation, we could have set an example of marriage between two women.'

The bride consoled her with the words, 'There's still time, have no regrets. We have to find the way to our salvation. There is nothing new in a marriage between a man and a woman. The sun always rises in the east. But what a wonder it would be if it were to rise in the west!'

Saying this, she opened a box and taking out her wedding sari, she put it on her husband with her own hands. Applying kohl in her eyes, she adorned her with ornaments. After this she put on her own clothes. Both of them shone brightly like the flame of a lamp. Making a gesture to avert the evil eye, she kissed the other girl on her cheeks and said lovingly, 'From now on your name is Beeja and mine Teeja. We are fortunate to have come together. And now, don't you ever utter a word of regret before me!'

Beeja looked at her own beauty and wondered, 'Is this a dream?'

Teeja embraced her and said, 'You silly girl, truth has never dawned like this before.'

When darkness disappeared the sun rose from its appointed place, but when the door of the bedchamber opened, the brilliance that emanated from it dazzled the seth's eyes. The truth, so well known to the parents, surprised them now as if they had never been aware of it. The father lunged at the girls like a mad dog. He shouted at his daughter, 'Why have you made yourself up like this? Don't you care for the prestige of the family and my word?'

Beeja couldn't help but laugh at her stuttering father. 'I wanted to ask you to explain your deception of all these years, but now I will neither ask nor explain anything,' she said.

Stamping his feet and frothing at the mouth, the father shouted, 'You shameless creature, how do you explain this? I will not let you dress yourself like this.'

Hearing all the commotion at the bedchamber's door, the mother came running. She hadn't slept a wink the previous night. The sight of her daughter adorned stung her like the sting of a scorpion. The agony of seeing her in a woman's ensemble was more torturous to her than the pain of death. The truth of her feminine beauty was unbearable. As the daughter opened her lips to ask something, the mother wrapped her arms around her and began to cry bitterly. Crying hopelessly she said, 'Don't ask me anything, please don't. I pleaded with him; I used flattery too, but all in vain. Please don't curse your father.'

A smile lit up Teeja's face as she said, 'So, even now you are more worried about a curse! Don't worry about that. We are obliged to you for the invaluable lesson you have taught us.'

When the father heard these words he took off his pugree and placing it at her feet and pleaded, 'Daughter-in-law, my

prestige is in your hands. Make your husband see sense and make her wear the clothes she used to.'

She laughed, 'You still call me daughter-in-law? The things people do for their prestige! It is beyond me to understand how fake clothing will save it? And what would you do with such prestige, anyway? So far you did what you wanted to, now allow us to do what we wish to do. We only wish to publicly accept as a blessing what has been given to us as deceit by you.'

The seth now flared up and on hearing Teeja's words he became his old self. With angry red eyes, he said, 'My words are the command in this household. If you are going to be obstinate, there is no place for you here.'

This time Beeja spoke, 'We aren't going to live here anyway so all that you're saying is irrelevant—we're digressing from the real issue. We were coming over to you to say this. Bless us if you want—we're leaving now. We detest breathing the same air as you.'

The seth bluntly announced, 'Go, if you wish, but I will not let you touch a single article from the dowry. Don't think you can take anything.'

While the father seethed with anger, the daughter couldn't help laughing. She laughingly said, 'We have no faith in anyone except ourselves. Why are you upset for nothing? We will not touch even a shred of the dowry. We are ready to go naked if it doesn't embarrass you.'

The seth now abandoned whatever consideration he had for the father-daughter relationship. 'I knew this would happen. Now you're going to dance naked from one place to another, but whatever you do, the gold ornaments are mine. It's because I brought you up this way that it's all there or else getting such a dowry and gold would have been just a dream for you,' he said.

'Such dreams could only make you happy.' Saying this, they began to take off their ornaments. When, after taking off jewellery, Teeja began to take off her *rakhadi* too, the

mother broke down and pleaded, 'Don't take off this auspicious sign of marriage.'

The seth's greed knew no bounds, yet, family prestige was of greater importance than greed. And when his daughter forsook all honour, he lost control. His stubbornness and irritation rose to new heights and added fuel to fire. When he heard his wife's sentimental words he grit his teeth and said, 'Marriage has nothing to do with this. Aren't the poor women, who cannot afford a *rakhadi*, considered married? I will not concede even a pin to them.'

The girls took off their *rakhadis* happily and handed them over. For the first time in her married life the wife snubbed the husband, 'Have you been bitten by a mad dog?'

Beating his chest, the seth growled, 'These two have been bitten by a mad dog, but why would you see it? I am not going to be outdone. If they wish to forego a legacy worth lakhs of rupees, let them.'

When it seemed impossible to even breathe in the vitiated environment, both of them walked away from it without another word. The mother's heart was in utter confusion. She asked in a choked voice, 'Daughter, where will you go?'

'Wherever destiny takes us,' said Beeja.

News of such matters travels faster than any horse or even the wind. But the neighbours were pretending to be deaf. They did hear the whispers, but were unsure. Though everyone is naked under their clothing yet who could dare to openly question everything? Influential people can make even a stone float on water. The people of the neighbourhood could survive without the sun but not without the seth. Everybody bowed his head and wondered but who would bell the cat? No one had heard or seen anything like this before. Yet no one broke the silence. They knew that whosoever spoke would be doomed. They all pretended to be unaware of the entire episode.

Yet when people saw the seth's son coming out of the mansion in a woman's dress, they were stunned. They could

hardly believe what they were seeing! The news spread without a word being spoken. The air was ripe with tension and speculation. How could this be? How could an elephant be made to pass through the eye of a needle? It was as if a hornet's nest had been broken into. All abuzz, people ran out onto the streets and put their heads together. Two women getting married to each other? This was a slap on the manliness of men. This would unravel the very fabric of society. The face of the sun itself would be blackened. How did the seth suppress the truth for so long? What bigger fraud than this could there be? If this matter were not settled, nobody would respect the village headman, the *panch*.

This demon could not be contained so simply.

Within no time the senior and junior *panch* surrounded the two girls. The air was thick with threats and challenges, 'Beware, not a step further till the matter is settled! If women marry each other, then men will have to look for a rat hole!'

Teeja shot a rude reply that couldn't be heard as everyone had something to say. Cries for justice reverberated in the air. As Beeja raised her hand for silence, words died on everybody's lips. When there was silence, she said loudly, 'We do not seek justice, but if you're not satisfied, wait a little till I go to the mansion and come back.'

Saying this she walked towards the mansion. People made way for her on their own. When she came back after a while, she had a scarecrow in her hand. It was dressed in a pugree, an angarkhi and a dhoti. She sat down close to Teeja, and began digging a hole. People silently watched her as she fixed the scarecrow in the ground. The tail of the scarecrow's pugree was touching the earth. The face of the scarecrow showed an impressive moustache under a bulbous nose. She then stood up and said aloud, 'If this scares us then we are scared of you men and your moustaches. All of you are worse than this scarecrow. We are going forward and we challenge you to stop us from doing it. Let's see which one of you men dares to stop us.'

The words worked like magic. The men could see their own faces in the scarecrow. Everyone stared at the scarecrow and each one feared seeing his own image while the two girls walked away undeterred. Nobody dared to raise his eyes. As they disappeared, the scarecrow seemed to be laughing at them. What was there to laugh at? How dare a scarecrow jeer at living men? The scarecrow's demeanour irked them so much that they attacked it. It was only after they had shredded it to pieces that they were pacified. The crowd turned to go back to where it had come from and as soon as each man got into his own den, he began to roar at his womenfolk.

Beeja and Teeja walked out of the village hand in hand. There was greenery all around. Maize as high as one's head stood swaying in the air. The ridges were covered with creepers, and the shrubs and bushes were completely covered with green leaves. Clouds rolled in the sky and the beauty of the earth seemed infinite. It was as if nature's beloved daughters were witnessing the beauty of nature for the first time in their lives. They played like innocent does and climbed the mountain. Filled with joy, they ran straight up to the top of the mountain and began to pirouette. From so great a height, all human habitat looked like ugly pockmarks.

Soon the clouds descended on the mountain and it began to pour. Drums of happiness echoed all around as lightning quivered—impatient to have a glimpse of the beauty of the couple. Beeja wiped Teeja's face and said, 'The lightning is thirsting to see our beauty. It will not be satisfied as long as our bodies are wrapped in clothes.'

'Why do we need a cover? Why keep the lightning unsatisfied?' responded Beeja.

As they undid their bodices, lightning flashed. It seemed it had been languishing, parched in the clouds for ages, waiting for this very sight. The glimpse of the two pairs of lotus flowers satisfied it and the drums of joy began to roll once again.

The lightning flashed once again after a while. This time

each flash lasted longer. Oblivious to their surroundings, the two girls were knotted in a passionate embrace, eager to reach into the depths of each other's bodies, drinking in the nectar of the lips.

Like a cloud they continued to rain till they were spent and then their embrace slackened. The dead beauty of the mountain acquired a new meaning and lightning acquired a new glow.

Becoming conscious of their nakedness, the girls put on their clothes. Lightning flashed with a roar as if it resented this obstruction, and with a clap of thunder, they embraced tightly once again.

Frolicking in the rain, descending the mountain, they felt as light as flowers and their joy overflowed. Satisfied, the earth unravelled all its beauty, immersed in the pure love of the couple.

When they reached the plains they had experienced the height of their passion. If there was anything more pure and more sacred in the world than the clear water shed by the clouds, it was their intense love!

Yet in this human world human beings cannot survive on love alone. Moreover, they were women who wanted to live together at the risk of alienating all men. This was a challenge as tough as turning a mountain upside down. Yet, whatever the challenges, they would never turn to the village again.

Lost in conversation they walked on and soon reached a haunted well. Darkness had begun to fall and when the rain stopped, they squeezed their clothes dry.

The jungle echoed with its own peculiar sounds. In the isolated well there lived one hundred and twenty-eight ghosts. At night not even a bird could flap its wings there. Whoever came close to the step-well never went back alive.

Even in broad daylight, people were scared to pass within a mile of the well. The two girls sat on the ridge of the well. Their hearts knew no fear while up in the sky the moon—in its thirteenth day—played hide-and-seek with the clouds.

Suddenly Beeja said, 'The moon has just whispered a spell in my ear. I'll tell you if you give me a kiss.'

Teeja ventured, 'Who needs the spell if I get a kiss from you!'

'But it's worth knowing.'

'Then you tell me without my asking.'

'The moon is telling me that I should not be ignoring the beautiful moon next to me and instead, looking at his ugly face.'

'You liar, the moon said this to me.'

The two moons began to drink in each other's nectar. Suddenly a strange voice reached their ears, 'I knew you would come here.'

Disengaging themselves they looked around. A white form stood before them smiling. He seemed to have been made out of the moonlight. He said, 'Today our lonely well has been purified. It is surprising though that you weren't afraid to climb the steps of this haunted well.'

They stood up diffidently. Slowly, Beeja said, 'It is humans we fear, not ghosts.'

Hearing this the head of the ghosts said, smiling, 'You are absolutely right. We are rotting as ghosts only because of the evil deeds of human beings. We take revenge on those who are afraid of us by scaring them even more. We hate the very name of humans. Today these bastards didn't leave a stone unturned in troubling you in the village square.'

Amazed, Teeja interrupted him, 'How do you know?'

The ghost elaborated, 'We learned about your marriage through humans. Why would we lose a chance to have fun? Unseen by human eyes, our ghost community watched the entire drama. We felt an instant compassion when we saw you. It is we who created the commotion of the scarecrow to save you from those barbarians. Otherwise they wouldn't have spared you. I accompanied you all along right up to the mountain to ward off any untoward event.'

The girls became shy at hearing this. The chieftain of the

ghosts started laughing. He said, 'You didn't mind the lightning, then why be shy of me? Witnessing your love has made my life meaningful. I am the head of the ghosts. You can live here without fear. I am going to erect a Single-Pillared Palace for you, which even kings would envy. The king's treasury may have its ups and downs, but you will never be short of anything. Your wishes will be fulfilled from time to time. I will never be able to pay you back for the happiness that has come to me after having seen the purity of your love. Not even the shadow of a man will fall in your direction. Now you live happily in this Single-Pillared Palace.'

When they looked in the direction that the head of the ghosts indicated, they saw the palace—a sheer white structure with exquisite carving and beautiful latticed windows! An enchanting light shimmered inside while the gentle light of the moon cascaded outside.

They had not expected such a blessing would be showered on their love. As they entered the palace, they were stunned. A courtyard made of saffron, walls made of soft pastel colours, and a vermilion ceiling. A lotus flower formed the bed and rose petals were the bedspread. Like two love-birds bathed in hues brighter than the vermilion red, they were so engrossed in sheer sensual bliss that they completely forgot about the affairs of the outside world. What could compare with this primeval trance of Kamdev?

Finally the trance broke as consciousness came back to them and they smiled as their eyes met. Beeja spoke mingling the sweetness of her voice with the purity of the smile, 'Seeing our love must have once again made the life of the head of the ghosts meaningful!'

Teeja responded spontaneously saying, 'Even the gods above must have been blessed.'

At dawn when they came out of the palace, they felt as if the sun had emerged from the pure petals between their thighs. All the pleasures of the world yearned to inhabit the bed of

pleasure at the Single-Pillared Palace. Their own thirst encompassed the thirst of the entire universe.

The fortnight of sheer bliss was gone in a wink. The ghost chieftain took care of all their needs.

One day he told them, 'You have forgotten the world, but the world has not forgotten you even for a moment. Go round the village without fear for I am always with you to lend support. The women of the village are free to come here when they like. Loneliness can kill even the sun, and the moon too wanes when it is alone.'

Both spoke together, 'But we are two of us.'

He smiled and said, 'Yet you have one life and that vanishes when you make love.'

By now they were less shy of the ghost. At his observation they giggled loudly. The ghost's smile paled in comparison to their laughter.

Soon after this exchange, flitting around like butterflies, they reached the village. Those very barns and walls! The very same thatched huts! Every one living within one's own boundary, one's own kitchen and one's own hearth. Everybody engrossed in their own fire and their own smoke. The tug of war of yours and mine continued over and over again. Dirt piled up all around. Life seemed bankrupted of all beauty. There were people yearning, crying to have children. Yet, there were stinking nappies strewn all over the place while noisy children ran around. Every home had its own problems and they somehow survived.

They wondered how they had lived and grown up in this hell for all those years. They shuddered at the memory of it. Though the villagers were still happily making colourful motifs on the wall, singing songs on festivals, making sweetmeats on auspicious occasions, swinging on the swing, dancing and singing, strangely, no one seemed to notice the dirt and the filth.

Seeing the two of them together for the second time, no

one was willing to dispense justice again. Instead, out of fear of the ghost of the well, they hid behind closed doors. Who knows, he might just wring their necks and obviously, one's neck is dear to everyone. These two ladies were good enough only to live with ghosts and in any case they were happy only living with them. Maybe only ghosts could deal with them. Yet, whoever met them, met with lowered head. Even their lathis, festooned with wire, were shivering.

Beeja's father sat on the terrace busy with his accounts. When his eyes fell on the daughter and the daughter-in-law, he almost fainted. He began to shiver as he got up and his loincloth came off. Bringing his hands together in supplication, he said, 'I will return all your ornaments and dowry with interest. Please be kind to me.'

Irritated, Beeja came forward and nodding her head, said, 'We don't crave for gold and dowry. We just came to meet you. We don't want anything from you.'

Spittle flew from the seth's mouth as he said, 'Why shouldn't you? Aren't you my daughter?'

'I am your daughter, I know. I really do know your love. If you ever mention the giving and taking of things, I won't come again,' she said.

The father couldn't think of an answer. When he stopped stammering, he ventured, 'You live in a royal palace. It will not be possible for you to come. Whenever you send for me, I will visit you.'

The fear of the ghosts remained unmentioned. The daughter was filled with abhorrence. She felt as if she were neck deep in manure. She turned away from him. Teeja, as it was, did not wish to even touch the steps of her in-laws' place. Picking up his undone loin cloth, the father came after them whining, 'Daughter, won't you meet your mother? She has gone blind crying for you.'

Ready to leave, Beeja said, 'Send mother to us. There will be no danger to her.'

Saying this she walked away quickly. Teeja too followed her. She understood the turmoil in Beeja's heart. After coming out of the village, Beeja said, 'I will find peace only after bathing in a tankful of perfume.'

Teeja diverted her by saying, 'Don't you think the incense of our breath would suffice?'

Saying this she pulled Beeja in her arms. The peacock's calls and the croaking of frogs sweetened the air. The leaping does became still to see the union. The pigeons danced as they cooed with joy and every particle of the jungle was mesmerized. It was as if the whole of creation was set free at the spectacle of the heavenly embrace.

After a while they began to miss the solitude of the Single-Pillared Palace and they joyfully ran towards it. The nauseating dirt of the village was left far behind.

Next day, in the early hours of the morning a persistent knock at the door woke up Beeja. She shook Teeja, put her clothes on and climbed down the steps to open the sandalwood door. Her mother was standing at the doorstep, accompanied by her cousin. Before Beeja could open her mouth, her sister said jokingly, 'Even married women don't sleep so late.'

Sleep still lingered in Beeja's eyes. For a moment she forgot that her mother was there and asked, 'Are we any less than married women.'

As soon as the two guests entered the palace, they were stunned by what they saw. It struck them now that all the rumours they had heard were true. Only ghosts could create such a world yet how was it possible? In their surprise, the beauty of the surroundings seemed magnified to their eyes. They had much to say, but words failed them. They were like two insignificant spiders lost in a golden palace. After a wide-eyed survey the mother stared at Beeja's face and asked, 'Did I really give birth to you?'

Beeja smiled as she said, 'This either you know or the midwife. How can I answer such a question?'

The cousin was irritated by the irrelevant question. She nudged her aunt and reminded her if she had come to ask only that.

At this Teeja countered sweetly, 'Why, is your visit wasted?'

Beeja then prepared all kinds of delicacies and served them with enthusiasm. After putting her mother and cousin to sleep on a gold bed, the girls sat down to have food.

After that Beeja went to her mother. The two women were sleeping with backs turned to each other. They tried to avoid sleep, but the golden bedstead with the velvet bed would have induced sleep even in a wounded and groaning human being and these were two tired, healthy women!

They woke up in the afternoon and looked around. Kings themselves would not dream of such luxury. Dreams seen through waking eyes are more painful. Coaxing her niece, the mother said, 'We have to talk to them, otherwise how will they understand?'

The niece heaved a deep sigh and said thoughtfully, 'The vision of such a palace would confuse anybody. Now we cannot think or see anything properly.'

The four of them chatted for a while. Then the cousin mustered enough courage and said, 'On the third day of your leaving the whole area was rife with the news of the Single-Pillared Palace. Such news travels faster than the wind. But for the fear of the ghosts, there would have been another epic war to have the two of you married off. The king, who was ready to attack, ran back halfway. When the king himself accepted defeat how could anyone else carry on. Both the grownups and the young are restless and dissatisfied.'

'But what have we done?' interrupted Teeja.

'You couldn't have done anything worse. Your liaison has flattened every male ego,' replied the mother.

Beeja looked at her cousin and said, 'We can't do anything about this.'

This encouraged the cousin. Gaining confidence she started

explaining seriously, 'Yes, you can. That's why we have come here.'

The two lovers gave a serious hearing to what was being said. Continuing the advice, the cousin said, 'Your marriage was a farce since even your shadow is untouched by man's sweat.'

'Nor would we ever allow it to touch us,' said Teeja.

'No, daughter, this is not possible—not even in a dream. A woman can live without water, but not without a man. Your father has lots of offers from people who aspire to marry you. Rich young men from near and far wish to marry the two of you. Get rid of your false pride. Have a family. Look after your homes. Have children to carry forward the name of the family. Your father is prepared to give a double dowry for both of you.'

Teeja smiled wanly, 'We are the victims of this idea of carrying forward the name of the family. We have to root this out. We are happy the way we are and can only laugh at this advice.'

At this the mother's face fell. She turned to Beeja and wanted to know what she thought.

'I don't think any differently. Don't bother to come here with such advice again,' she replied.

The mother's heart sank when she saw the wild look in her daughter's eyes. She remembered the ghosts. Glancing at her niece she suggested, 'We should leave now—it's getting late.'

The niece got up and Beeja did not even see them off to the door. Whatever they had seen of the pillared hall was like a dream that they carried with them.

Next day, someone was knocking once again. Beeja opened the door and saw her cousin standing alone, with her head bent.

A surprised Beeja said, 'I dreamt of you standing here just like that and when I kissed you, you ran away. Let me kiss you again. Let's see now how you will escape.'

As Beeja kissed the cousin on her left cheek a stream of tears began to flow from her eyes. Beeja's smile faded. Pulling away her hands, she asked, 'You don't mind my kiss?'

The sister interrupted with a choked voice, 'Why would I mind a kiss? It has broken the dam that was holding my tears. I have been wracking my brain to find out how you two had the courage to do what you have done. I don't have the guts to see your union. Yesterday in your mother's presence, I couldn't find the opportunity to speak, so I've come by myself today.'

She looked pathetically at Teeja, and as she looked at their faces tears began to flow in torrents. The two let her cry till she could bring herself to speak.

Once the tears stopped flowing, she expressed the pain in her heart. She said, 'The agony of separation from my family mingled with the excitement of going to my in-laws' house on my wedding night. But the happiness was ruined on the first night itself. Despite being a man, my husband did not have a trace of manhood. My in-laws knew everything yet they put up a huge wedding. They were hoping that maybe a virgin young bride would succeed in warming their cold son, that his manhood would come alive. But they thought wrong and I had to bear the brunt of their mistake. And when nothing worked, my impotent husband bit me all over to assuage his deflated ego.'

After narrating this she showed her body to them. There were blue marks all over her back, breasts, arms, buttocks and thighs. It proved futile to cry in front of her parents. Respectable families turn a blind eye to a lapse like this one so who would talk of crimes perpetrated behind closed doors? Unwillingly, she had to submit to the lechery of her father and brother-in-law. For how long can a lamb be safe in the leopard's cave? The husband did not object even when he came to know of it and began devoting more and more time to his business. Business was thriving after his marriage and

profits had increased manifold. Consequently, everyone was happy with the good-omened daughter-in-law.

Beeja woke up from her silent meditation. She sighed, 'And you also had to be happy with them?'

'There was no other way out,' she said.

Teeja asked, 'Are you happy still?'

'Yes, sort of, but your courage has awakened my pain once again.'

Beeja said impatiently, 'Now, you don't need to go anywhere. Nobody can challenge the three of us.'

Shaking her head, the sister said, 'No, no, I haven't come here to stay. Crying in front of you has made my heart feel lighter and only death will free me from my in-laws. We have lakhs of rupees worth of property, cattle, and a seven-storeyed building apart from many others. It's not easy to break away from all that. I have not conceived as yet and I still have to give an heir to the property. My younger brother-in-law is here to escort me back. We leave the day after. I will always remain indebted to you. Though your courage and happiness have given me support, I'm not strong enough to live with you.'

There was so much to be said, but she could not go any further. Her throat choked and her eyes filled with tears. She rubbed her eyes dry and said, 'Yesterday you had made me eat separately, but today I'm going to eat with you. May be eating your leftovers will give me better sense.'

Teeja said, 'You already have good sense, but you are haunted by the ghost of traditions.'

As the word 'ghost' was uttered, the chieftain of the ghost presented himself in front of them. This did not intimidate the cousin. She just stared at the glowing presence. The ghost asked, 'Why did you call me?'

Teeja could not resist laughing as she said, 'You are not that ghost. You are the invisible, eternal flame of the times to come. Yet your arrival is well-timed. We are surviving solely because of your support.'

The ghost said sheepishly, 'Don't praise me to the skies or I'll get all puffed up.'

He glanced at the cousin and said, 'I heard your sad story. Now, go to your in-laws' house happily and you will find your husband a man. Your elder brother-in-law and father-in-law will not be able to cast even a glance in your direction. Your husband's virility will give you the five Pandavas.'

The cousin's happiness knew no bounds. Teeja said, 'See that you don't go mad with happiness.'

Beeja addressed the ghost, 'So you can do such things too?'

The ghost responded pompously, 'Is there anything we cannot do?'

In celebration of the unexpected blessing, the four of them shared their meal and after chatting for a while Beeja and Teeja saw the cousin off to the village. They insisted that she should intimate to them any good news as soon as she reached home.

On the way back when Beeja seemed too quiet, Teeja asked her, 'Why are you so preoccupied? Won't you tell me?'

Beeja stopped short and said, 'I can't hide anything from you. What I am thinking is really worth considering. I'll tell you if you pay attention.'

Teeja blinked her eyes and asked, 'You have to be mad to think that anything you say is not important to me.'

Beeja then looked deep into her eyes and asked, 'Has no new idea struck you with this blessing?'

Teeja embraced her and said, 'What occurred to you, did occur to me too, but there was no point in it. There is nothing lacking in our happiness.'

'No, there is nothing lacking, but the blessing has revived my desire for repentance. If you agree, then the deception done to you can be rectified.' Beeja observed.

'I never considered it to be a curse,' Teeja said.

'That is alright, but I can't close my eyes to my mistake . . . Closing one's eyes does not lessen the blackness of the sin. It actually magnifies it. Won't you agree to this thing—if only for my sake?'

Teeja moaned with pleasure as the embrace tightened, 'Had I not agreed, this happiness would not have come to us.'

'But you think this joy is the ultimate?'

'It is the ultimate.'

'No, the ultimate is still far, far away.'

'It is only an illusion still if you think the limits of happiness lie somewhere beyond this, and that you need to ask for the boon.'

Beeja freed herself from the embrace and feigned anger, 'You don't understand. You have to ask for this boon to wash away my sin.'

'But I don't wish to be a man in any birth! You were reared like a boy, so if you wish it, I will agree to it. Let's test the sweetness of such a union too.'

When Teeja did not agree Beeja had to give in. With this desire, her fingers began to itch to twirl the moustaches. Now as a real man she would once again wear the attire of a man.

The ghost chieftain met them at the gate of the palace. Beeja could not contain herself even for a moment. She left Teeja behind and approached him asking frankly, 'Can this blessing given to my cousin's husband, bear fruition for me too?'

The chieftain spoke aloud so that Teeja too could hear, 'Why not? I was hesitant to initiate it. Ask whatever you desire. I have no dearth of boons.'

Teeja's face reddened. She began scratching the earth with her toe and said with lowered eyes, 'What is the hurry? Let us enjoy the last night of our togetherness as women.'

The chieftain smiled and added, 'If you are too fond of your present status I can put a condition that if Beeja ever tires with her maleness, she will revert to womanhood.'

Beeja, who was dreaming of becoming a man, interrupted the chieftain, 'Why would I do that after getting the boon with such difficulty?'

The ghost said, 'It's up to you.'

The kohl-black sky had stars strewn here and there. Looking at them Teeja said, 'This night is mine, I'll not let you sleep a wink.'

Beeja turned her face and responded pertly, 'Later on you will have to keep awake every night, just think of that.'

'I don't have to think anything after tonight.'

Beeja heard clearly what Teeja said but she failed to understand its essence. They shut the door and approached the bedchamber, their anklet bells tinkling. Teeja was in a hurry today. By the time Beeja had taken off her blouse, she had pulled away all her clothes. Pulling Beeja's hand, she said, 'Why are you so slow today? Earlier you used to be so impatient.'

After that, like two beautiful flamingoes they entwined with each other and spent the night. Teeja wished the night would never end while Beeja was impatiently waiting for the dawn.

Whatever they might have wished, the night passed at its usual pace. The soft morning sunlight felt harsh to Teeja.

With the dawn of the sun Beeja felt a tremor spreading thorough her body. Within no time her breasts were flat. There was an itch of the first sprout of moustache on her lips and cheeks. When she touched herself to scratch below the navel she realized she had become a real man. Her body was covered with dark, curly bristles. Happy and excited, she looked at her face in the mirror. For a moment she was terrified of her own twirled moustaches. But it would not do to be afraid of one's own facial hair. The pride and pleasure of having a moustache lies in intimidating others.

She saw a pugree, an angarkhi and a dhoti hanging on a peg. Having spent many years in male attire, he now quickly put on the dhoti in triangular style, put on the angarkhi and tied the pugree just right. The tail of the pugree swung arrogantly down to his knees. Proudly he began looking around him but couldn't see Teeja anywhere. She ought to have been here at this moment. Shouting her name loudly he

began wandering around the Single-Pillared Palace. Teeja called from the bathroom, 'Don't come in, I'm having my bath.'

Beeja was irritated with this modesty and lunged straight in the direction of her voice. He withdrew the ruby studded curtain and went in. Teeja doubled with shyness as she said, 'Do please turn your face away, let me put on my clothes.'

Surprised, the husband came out and said, 'You didn't have such modesty earlier.'

'It was different then.'

'But we are the same person. You just see my new form. My moustache, my pugree!'

'The pugree was there earlier too.'

Beeja was irked, 'Why are you wasting time? Why don't you come out quickly?'

And then Teeja came out glowing and resplendent in gorgeous clothes and jewellery. Stepping into the room she looked at the husband from head to toe. How handsome! What curved moustaches, what a muscular body! Such thick, black hair! She said, 'May the evil eye be averted. Let me tie a black thread on your wrist.'

The husband witnessed a new beauty in Teeja. What lustrous eyes! And what a voluptuous body! Every pore of his own body seemed to be on fire. As Teeja touched his wrist while tying the black thread, the husband could no longer control himself. A current ran through him and clutching Teeja's arm he said, 'I'm going to settle all old scores today.'

Teeja heard him and wondered from where he had learnt all this. Teasing his wife the husband spoke again, 'Today, without a lamp, I will create so much light in the bedroom that you'll not be able to forget it.' Teeja interrupted the husband, 'Forget it. It is only now that you have become a man but you seem to know their ways from before!'

'It seems that the day is not going to end today.'

'Have patience, it will end. You must be tired after the

restless night. Have your food and rest for a while. Meanwhile I'll go to the village.'

'You too were awake the whole night. And how is it that you want to leave without me?'

'Do you think I would go with you? You have taken leave of all shame and caution but I still have to use my brains. Really, one has to remember worldly matters.'

The husband smiled and said, 'I think I will have to show you all about worldly matters.'

Saying this he picked her up in his arms. Teeja flailed her arms and feet, but to no avail. He put her on the rose petal bed and climbed on top of her.

She felt she was drowning in the darkness when all of a sudden a luminous light spread all around. The lotus petals seemed to be ready to disperse, but nothing happened. Creation itself seemed to have entered her body. After they were satiated, for some time they were oblivious to everything around them.

The husband said with his eyes still shut, 'We were labouring for nothing all these days.'

Turning around Teeja responded, 'Why labouring for nothing? That pleasure cannot be forgotten even after death.'

The night was spent the same way. During these phases, a new feeling began to simmer in the husband's mind—the idea that the man was more powerful than the woman. The unlimited power of man could in no way be compared with a woman's fragility. Man was, after all, the Supreme Being.

The same night Teeja's womb was impregnated with the seed of her husband. They fell into deep slumber in the last hours of the night. The husband woke up late after daybreak. The bedroom was filled with sunlight and along with this glow, egotism began to build up inside him. Man's vigour and power seemed to have risen in the sky in the shape of the sun, while the woman appeared to be a mere shadow. Earlier the Single-Pillared Palace was owned by both of them and they had equal rights. But now, things had to be clarified, he

thought, or else Teeja might still continue thinking of herself as she did earlier. In his new role Beeja did not even wait for Teeja to wake up. He began to call out her name and shook her as she slept. Teeja woke up with a start. Rubbing her eyes, she said, 'Why did you wake me up like this?'

The husband didn't like the question. He said dryly, 'You can sleep later, but I want an answer to a question right now. Who is the master of the palace, you or I?'

Teeja couldn't quite grasp the significance of the question. She didn't respond and remained quiet. Impatiently, the husband repeated the question. Noting the curve of the moustache of her husband, she answered, 'Why talk of ownership? We live in it together.'

'I'm not asking about living together or not. I want a clear answer as to who the real owner of this palace is.'

Teeja replied quietly, 'The chieftain of the ghosts.'

The husband was taken aback, but the very next moment, he asked in an irritated voice, 'Why do you talk in riddles? Tell me clearly, after we were given the palace, who became the owner? You or me?'

Teeja went numb. How he has changed colour overnight she thought—Beeja never asked such questions. Such drastic change after becoming a man! She realized now that politeness wouldn't do. She said, 'This property belongs to us equally. But, if you have any doubts, we can clarify from the ghost chieftain.'

The husband was furious. Viciously, he said, 'Why intimidate me with the chieftain's name. What would he get by siding with me? Even in my dreams I couldn't have thought that you could be so deceitful.'

'But now you have thought it.'

The man with the curved moustaches went mad with anger. He started saying all sorts of obnoxious things, 'I'm no less than this lover of yours. I'm going to build an empire of my own and it will have unlimited treasures. I'll have a huge

army and an impregnable fort where hundreds of queens like you will wait on me.'

'Why talk all this nonsense early in the morning?' Teeja interrupted him.

Stretching, she got down from the bed and not saying anything further she went out of the bedchamber. The Single-Pillared Palace was a source of agony to her now. From where had the 'I' come between them within a single night? It was the same age-old, well-trodden path. Walking on this would amount to getting into the same rut. As soon as Beeja got into the being of a man, her pure self had blackened, just like darkness envelopes everything after sunset.

Even a bath in the pool of nectar did not give her peace. An eclipse makes the sun and the moon helpless. Staying here any longer would only increase their bitterness and bring about discord. It would be better to visit her cousin rather than wait for news from her. Living away for a few days might dilute the bitterness that had crept between them.

She dressed simply, opened the door of the palace and as she was ready to leave, the raging husband pulled on her chunari and asked, 'Where are you going after setting my heart on fire?'

'You won't believe me, so there's no point in telling the truth,' she replied coolly.

'Leave that to me—but tell me, how dare you leave without my permission?' he asked.

What a deadly rift had come to divide them within a day! To mend things somehow Teeja said, 'You're not yourself today. I'll just go and visit your maternal cousin. You'll have settled down in a few days' time. As soon as you send me word, I'll be back.'

'You think you can fool me! You want to kill me with the help of the ghosts. I know whores like you very well. Walk back into the bedroom now or ...'

Teeja smiled as she said, 'Or what will you do?'

The smile on Teeja's lips enraged him to such an extent

that letting go of the chunari he now caught her by her hair. One tug made her fall on the ground. Dragging her by her plait, he shouted, 'I'm not one of those weak husbands who tolerate their wives' tantrums.'

He dragged Teeja inside and threw her on the bed. Teeja clenched her teeth, closed her eyes and didn't allow a sound to escape. She didn't wish to demean herself by showing her pain to a lowly man like him. She felt suffocated and faint and soon lost consciousness.

Leaving an unconscious Teeja in the palace, the husband went away locking the door. Like a mad man, he started wandering around in the jungle. Walking aimlessly he strayed to the same old mountain. With its pile of dry stones it looked ugly and colourless to him. Creation seemed to be in mourning. Scenes of that day began to appear one by one in front of his eyes as he reached the top of the mountain. Even when he closed his eyes the scenes persisted. But where was the beautiful rain! Where were the clouds? Where were the lips and the passionate embrace? Where would he find the eternal oneness of love? Every pore of his body throbbed to become Beeja again. And with this desire itself his appearance began to change. His cheeks were soft once again. Two lotus flowers encased in the angarkhi seemed eager for the touch of Teeja's palms!

Beeja climbed down the hill and undid the latch on the door of the palace. In a state of frenzy she reached the bedchamber and began shaking the unconscious Teeja. 'Teeja, Teeja, I have given up manhood. Just open your eyes and see your Beeja!'

Teeja gained consciousness after sometime. As she opened her eyes she saw Beeja bending over her like a delicate creeper her face shining with the same tender love that she knew so well! That soft, sensuous body! They pulled each other in an embrace that has not slackened till today.

With the magic of the ghost chieftain, Teeja lost her pregnancy and Beeja the manhood and no man could ever

enter the palace again. Only on one occasion, on Teeja's invitation, did I go there and have a glimpse of the Single-Pillared Palace and wrote their story as Teeja narrated it to me. May the chieftain of the ghosts spare my life, if I have added a single word of my own to her narration!

t w o

discretion

In a jungle, near a pond filled with water, lived a jackal and his mate. The walls of their den were neatly plastered and the place was clean and tidy. The jungle abounded in the jujube shrubs and berries that the two of them thrived on.

The jackal and his mate loved each other deeply and were ready to sacrifice their lives for one another. The she-jackal had an upright character and was more virtuous than Sita herself. She wouldn't allow even a fly or a mosquito to touch her body. But she was very conceited and frequently put on delicate airs to keep the jackal on his toes.

Her narcissism affected the jackal in such a way that he too began to boast of how he had once knocked down a lion with his tail and how the lion had tumbled seven times with the sheer force of the blow. He said that he had forgiven the lion only when he promised to behave. Not a leaf stirred in the forest without the jackal's permission. His knitted brows would make tigers scurry around in terror. Now he was the king of the jungle as well as its all-powerful emperor. Once, in anger, he had kicked at a dune which collapsed like a child's sand castle. The jackal's roar made the clouds rupture. The she-jackal was indeed proud of him.

Once, at midnight, the she-jackal felt thirsty and woke up her husband to accompany her to the pond. Drowsy with sleep, the jackal said, 'I'm very sleepy. Why don't you go by yourself and . . .?'

The she-jackal interrupted him with a wry expression on

her face and said, 'How can I, a lone female, go by myself?'

'But who would harass you there?'

The she-jackal said coquettishly, 'What do you men know about a woman's modesty! It's just that it is beyond my control, or I wouldn't tolerate the air or sunlight to touch me.'

Still half asleep, the jackal boasted, 'Why speak of control when I control everything. If you wish it I could so entangle the sunlight and the air in thorny bushes that they would not be able to free themselves for eternity.'

'First, come with me. My throat is too parched to speak anymore.'

At the she-jackal's persistence, the jackal went with her. There was a full moon in the sky and the jungle's beauty was bathed in the light of the moon. There were red berries on the bushes and every twig and leaf of the jungle slept in the lap of moonlight. The she-jackal looked up at the moon. Such exquisite beauty! Completely enchanting! A hundred thousand jackals could not compete with its beauty, she thought.

The jackal stood nearby as his mate drank from the pond. Having finished drinking, she was about to look up when she noticed the moon's wickedness. Hidden under the water the rogue had been kissing her lips all this while! Braving the cruel winter, he had taken a dip in the cold water for her. How difficult these lowly men made it for a woman to protect her modesty!

She turned in indignation to her husband and said, 'You just stand and stare while this rascal moon has dared kiss me! Had you not been with me, the moon would surely have outraged my modesty.'

This made the jackal go red with anger. He gritted his teeth and said, 'Who? This feeble scoundrel of a moon! How dare he? You just give the word and I will tear him to pieces.'

Saying this he began stamping his paw like a lion. He would wipe off the moon from the sky this very instant. The

she-jackal lifted her face once again. The moon too craved to see her radiant, captivating face! She interrupted the jackal saying, 'Let it go. Because of the evil-eyed moon, the whole world will suffer and children will be scared of the dark.'

The jackal fumed with anger and stamping his paw once again, said, 'No, no, you just say so and I will beat the moon to pulp this very moment.'

'Leave it. Let it go. Why take unwarranted blame on yourself?', she admonished him gently.

The jackal agreed after a lot of cajoling. On their way back, the wife reasoned that it was for a woman to protect her modesty with prudence and discretion. She would not step out of the den at night now—let the lecherous moon languish.

Baring his teeth at the shameless moon, the jackal went into his den. Lost in vain thoughts of her beauty, the she-jackal couldn't sleep for a long time. The next morning when she awoke, the sun had already been up for two hours. When she came out of the den rubbing her eyes, she felt as if the sun was waiting to get a glimpse of her beauty.

All these men are alike, she thought, they deserve to be roasted alive. Yet, the stud looked so dazzling! Its power made everything bright and shining! Smiling to herself, she wondered if he too would behave as shamelessly as the moon. So, even though she was not really thirsty, she began pestering her husband to accompany her to the pond again.

'You mad woman, what are you afraid of during the day?' the jackal said.

The insistent she-jackal explained, 'If gods like the moon can be led astray, who can be trusted? How can a woman trust anyone? Now I'm afraid even of dying alone.'

Still unwilling, the jackal accompanied his adamant spouse. Every time she threw a sideways glance, she caught the sun lusting after her.

As she reached the pond she found that just like the moon, the lecherous sun too was hiding in the pond. What do these

men get by lusting after women all the time? Then, after bending her face to drink water, the she-jackal turned to her husband hesitatingly, 'I knew this would be so. This lowly sun has beaten the moon. Look, he is hiding under water in broad daylight.'

The jackal jumped to her side, and asked angrily, 'Where? Where is the bastard?'

She showed him the reflection of the sun in the water and said, 'There he is, the rogue!'

Now how could the jackal contain his anger? Stamping his paw like earlier, he said, 'If you just give me the order, I will bury the sun in the earth.'

The she-jackal pacified her husband, saying, 'Let it be. Let's not be so selfish as to put the whole world to trouble. How would anyone in the world manage to live without sunlight?'

This further infuriated the jackal. He stamped his paw with redoubled vigour and snarled, 'No, no, tell me, should I swallow the sun like a berry or gouge him out of the sky like the seed of a watermelon?'

The she-jackal wrapped her arms around his feet and pleaded, 'Let it go. Be merciful. This will bring us a bad name. Why take unwarranted blame?'

The jackal shouted in anger, 'It would be a sin to spare the rogue. You just wait and see . . .'

'I don't want to see anything. The world wouldn't be able to see anything if I see. Forgive him. It's for a woman to protect her modesty with prudence and discretion. You look up and keep an eye on this rascal while I drink.'

Persuaded by his wife, the jackal somehow contained his anger. Unblinking, he stared at the sun. The sun was so daunted by his power that it did not dare move from its place. In the meanwhile the she-jackal had her fill of water. And while she drank, the sun kept kissing her lips hungrily. Her thirst had never been satisfied so.

After all, thirst is not within one's control and many a

time, the she-jackal would drag the husband along at all hours of day and night to the pond. And the jackal would keep a steady vigil on the sun and the moon. Thus, the she-jackal, forever eager for the kisses of both the sun and the moon happily continued to quench her thirst with them, one by one. Ultimately, everybody's modesty and everybody's discretion is his own!

t h r e e

the crow's way

Selfishness is the formless god, selfishness Ram. Selfishness is worship, selfishness pilgrimage. Whether friend or brother; sister or sister-in-law; mother or father, the rules of selfishness govern all. The ways of religion, all false; false are the ways of love and attachment. Empty paths and empty *panths*, white robes and dark *sants*. Let the formless god fulfil every form of selfishness and bless them all.

Once, for three long years, such a terrible drought gripped the Thar Desert that even the rich could not find a wooden toothpick to pick their teeth with. With no water or fodder, wretched animals lay stupefied as life quietly slipped out of their skeletal, motionless bodies. As life seeped out of them, the mute animals themselves did not realize it. Only the crows and vultures did.

Cawing loudly, hordes of crows competed with each other to peck away at the dying animals but not one so much as wagged its tail. Wagging the tail takes energy. God was kind to the crows, for they had the most sumptuous feast since the beginning of creation. They had more than enough to satiate their greed by pecking away at animals despite full stomachs.

The crows had gotten used to spending the night resting against the dying animals. With sunrise they would fly up and start pecking away with loud cries. In the end, the air that bore the awful smell itself became putrid. Men found it impossible to breathe while the vultures and crows thrived.

One day, a fully satiated crow spoke thus with his better-half, 'We have heard such a lot about Lake Mansarovar in the Himalayas. Even if we keep pecking, the dead bodies here will last for years. If you agree, we could maybe visit the place.' The wife concurred saying, 'There is no need to ask me. Though it is difficult to leave this pleasant land, I have no choice but to agree to your suggestion or else even hell will have no place for me.'

The crow was elated, 'Let us go then. We crows have descended from the sun-god. Any time is auspicious for us to depart and morning dawns wherever we reach.'

Once started, even an ant will reach its destination, and they were crows after all and possessed long pinions capable of long flights. They took off and rested only after reaching the banks of the sacred lake on the third day.

The shimmering water was so clear, one could see right to the bottom. A variety of trees swayed in the wind and flowers in full bloom offered themselves to the gods. Different kinds of creepers bowed in reverence. Rows of white swans uttered mantras and precious pearls were scattered everywhere like manna from heaven.

But the crows from the Thar could not appreciate the sight. The poor swans here were eating pebbles! Whatever they had heard about Mansarovar was all false. They began to hanker for their homeland where there were dying bodies with oozing wounds and putrefying flesh. Crows do not eat pebbles! They were about to take flight when a row of swans surrounded them. The leader of the swans welcomed them saying, 'Blessed we are that guests like you have come here. It would be an insult to let you go without offering you our hospitality.'

At this the bird cawed, 'It is beyond your capacity to welcome us. No one in our country eats pebbles.'

The swans wondered which world these birds belonged to where pearls were not relished. The leader added politely, 'A close look would show you that these are not pebbles. We

eat nothing but pearls. We can serve whatever you want—rubies, emeralds, pearls and . . .’

The she-crow made a wry face and said, ‘Take away this trash. Your white colour is hateful to me. Go away from here. The sight of you chokes me.’

At their leader’s signal, all left except the she-swan. The swan looked hard at the blackness of crows and said, ‘For many years, we have believed that ours is the most enchanting land of all but today, you have opened our eyes. Which land do you swans come from?’

The crow said, ‘We are the crows of the Thar Desert. You can’t even begin to imagine its beauty. If you visit it once, your life will be blessed.’

‘We will surely visit if you are kind enough to invite us.’

When the swans decided to go with the crows, the entire colony of swans wished to accompany them. The head of the swans explained, ‘Don’t insist on this till my wife and I have seen the land. Then I won’t stop anybody.’ The swans agreed, though they could not help crying while parting. As the tears fell down on earth, they turned into glowing pearls.

On the way back to the Thar Desert, the crows rode the swans. Even before landing the swans began to suffocate. What kind of land was the Thar? Not a single tree for miles and miles! Colourless dunes of sand all over! Crows and vultures hovered over dead animals everywhere! They felt cheated and deceived by the low-born crows.

The crow cawed, ‘What are you waiting for? You can have as many carcasses as you wish. Nobody would dare say anything as long as I am with you.’

The swan couple could hardly breathe. For them it was a sin to even look at a sight like this. The she-swan said, ‘You crows are welcome to the Thar. We don’t feel like staying here even for a moment.’ With this the swan couple flew away. God knows what the low-born crow cawed to the others that the entire flock started giving chase. But how far can crows chase swans! Tired and defeated, they turned back.

Anyway, what would the swans know of the pleasures of eating juicy corpses, all birds are not as perceptive as crows.

It was not that easy for the swans to fly back to their destination. They had to pay a heavy price for befriending the crows. Rain fell heavily and gusts of cold wind buffeted them. It became difficult to land on soaked wings. With all their feathers drenched they somehow tumbled under a banyan tree.

There was a hollow in the trunk of the tree and the swans crawled into it. About twenty rain-soaked, squeaking mice were also huddled there. The swan couple took pity on them and helped the shivering mice by sheltering them under the warmth of their wings.

The swans were soon punished for helping the mice. How could mice forget their natural instincts? Once warmed, they began to nibble at the feathers of the swans and continued to do so right through the night.

At daybreak the swan said kindly, ‘Goodbye for now. Be happy. We did what we could.’ The she-swan too blessed the mice and came out of the hollow. Soon they started wondering why they felt so light. They turned around to discover two mounds of feathers. Tears rolled down their cheeks as they looked at each other and realized that they had been punished for trusting the crows and for being kind to the mice. Even death would have been better than losing their wings.

But who can fathom coincidence? The sun itself cannot penetrate its mysterious folds. As the dejected swan couple sat there, they saw a wealthy seth’s young son returning from a journey. He was a bit eccentric and moody and gesticulated and talked to himself as he walked with a gold stick in his hand. A water bag was slung across his shoulder. He had an attractive face and he was at that point of time looking forward to his bride’s coming home for the first time.

He did not notice the swans as he passed them by till they called out for help. Startled, he looked back and said with a

smile playing on his lips, 'I did not notice you. Swans you are, but what happened to your feathers?'

In a choked voice the swans narrated their tale of woe and said, 'Give us some water to soak our parched throats.'

He cupped his palms and gave them some from his water bag. He caressed the discoloured bodies of the swans. Remembering the delicious *churma* he was carrying with him the young man offered it to them to eat. The swans shook their long necks and said, 'We eat nothing but pearls and rubies.'

The whimsical young man started laughing, 'Don't worry! I have lots of rubies and pearls. When I visit you at Mansarovar, you can pay me back.'

Life flowed back into their bodies after gulping down some water. The she-swan said, 'Once we reach home we could give you cart loads of pearls, and even that would not pay back the debt we owe you. But we do not know how to get back home.'

The seth's son spoke eagerly, 'Don't lose heart! See, I am the only son of a rich seth. I am waiting for my wife to come home and then I will put you in a bullock-cart and send you home. Come with me.'

The swans were simpletons. When they could trust the wily crows, how could they distrust this eager young man? The seth's son fed pearls to them and put them on his shoulders. With a song on his lips, he set out for his village. His father was angry at his bringing the swans home and insisting that they be fed pearls. The older man was not yet aware of the newer ways of business.

On her arrival, the young bride began to take care of the swans. She was very simple, understanding, humble and extremely beautiful. She caressed the swans with her hennaed hands and fed them rubies and pearls and cuddled and loved the two as if they were her own children. The touch of the henna-coloured hands worked like magic and soon the swans began growing soft and lustrous feathers. She would make

them sleep on her bed at night and the touch of her breasts and kisses made them quickly regain their health and lost beauty.

As she made henna designs on her palms, so she decorated the wings of the swans. The swan couple would then take one or two long flights and return to the young woman's lap.

When it was time to return home, the swans shed lots of tears. The young woman also wept bitterly. But astonishingly, when their tears mingled, they turned into pearls.

When the husband saw this strange phenomenon he smiled indulgently and said to his wife, 'Enough, enough. The poor swans are going home after facing so many odds. Don't create a bad omen by crying so much.'

The parents were standing close by and the greedy seth interrupted his son, saying, 'You silly fellow! Tears are no bad omen. Don't you see the pearls? What better omen can there be? Let them cry freely. It will make their hearts lighter.'

The swans knew that they had to pay back their debt to the seth with the pearls. So for three nights and days they kept shedding tears of parting. The pearls that glowed all over the courtyard were worth four times the pearls the swans had been fed. The virtuous young bride had brought good luck for the family. The seth's eccentric son had done well by feeding pearls to swans and now the father decided never to stop him from doing anything he wanted.

The swans cuddled on the young woman's breast and flew away fluttering their wings and showering pearls on the mansion.

When the crows cawed from the walls, the seth's son shooed them away remembering that they had caused so much trouble for the swans. Irritated with this, one day the father said, 'What madness is this, son? We should feed sweet dumplings to the crows, because had they not cheated the swans, we would not have got this unlimited wealth. Use your brains.'

'Keep your brains to yourself, I don't need them,' replied the son, and stopped speaking to his father. His wife convinced him to give up this sort of behaviour with much effort. But, at his insistence, a servant was employed to chase away the crows who would sit around all day, stick in hand.

Thus life went on for three years.

One day the father advised the son, 'How long can we keep living off the money we have? Why don't you go to Mansarovar to meet the swans?'

This made the son angry. 'You have antagonized the whole community with your irritating babble at all hours of the day,' he snapped. 'It would be better if you go away to some foreign land yourself. I will not leave my young wife for any business till she conceives.'

'You stupid fellow, pregnancies do not always work out as planned. All the pundits have consulted their books and have declared that you are not fated to be a father. The swans must be remembering you everyday. Why don't you go to Mansarovar to meet them?' said the father.

The father had hit the target right. Convinced, now the son began jumping with joy, 'Oh! I had almost forgotten them; they must be really pining for me.'

The father selected a big bullock-cart and got his son started towards Mansarovar. The young woman looked on with sad eyes as she knew that her husband had not wanted to leave her till she became pregnant. However her father-in-law had talked him into it and the young man had forgotten the promise he had made to her. Soon the husband disappeared from sight.

The cart reached Mansarovar after five months. The leader of the swans came to his saviour, fanned him with his wings and sat in his lap. The she-swan inquired about his wife and parents' welfare. When asked about his children, the seth's son smiled sadly and said, 'My wife has not conceived yet, but my father forced me to come meet you.'

The she-swan observed, 'We used to wait for you everyday.

Had you not come for another few days, we would have visited you ourselves.'

In a short while a number of swans swarmed around them. They were all grateful to him for taking care of their leader and his partner. How beautiful and innocent they were! Their hearts were pure as the sacred water and the land was replete with rubies and pearls. It would be shameful to even think of filling the cart with them.

The she-swan kept blaming the son for not bringing his wife with him. There was plenty of space on the cart. She would have been truly overwhelmed by the beauty of the Mansarovar Lake. He promised he would bring her along on his next visit.

The swans were extremely hospitable. Lotus stem curry flavoured with rubies was served, followed by kheer and butter-soaked malpua. The seth's son ate huge quantities, yet his heart craved for more.

In the evening, while chatting, they heard a Brahminy duck say to her husband, 'Dearest, tell me a story!'

'Our story or others?'

'What is there to narrate in one's own story? It would be fun if you narrated someone else's story,' responded the Brahminy duck.

The husband said, 'I am a master at narrating stories of other people's lives. My stories are true. Listen carefully.'

The bird began his narration in a sweet voice, 'Today a rich seth's son has come to the swan leader's household. This young man has helped them in hard times. Had he not looked after them, the swans would have died. Now the time has come for them to repay the debt.'

The swan couple and the young man started listening closely, 'This young man has a lot of wealth, but no offspring. If he cohabits with his wife at midnight tonight, a son will be born to them. That son will cough out pearls and rubies whenever he clears his throat.'

The swan eagerly asked the young man, 'Did you hear that?'

The young man sighed, and said to the swans, 'What is the point of listening to this. I can't reach my wife at the auspicious hour even in my dreams.'

'Forget about dreams; I can fly you to your wife's room before midnight. And chop my wings off if you don't reach there even before you can start dreaming,' replied the swan leader.

God alone knows what made the whimsical son believe the swan.

When, desirous of meeting the young wife, the she-swan asked to come along, both of them readily agreed. The young man closed his eyes and climbed the swan's back. They were soon airborne, the she-swan flying above and the swan below. The wind itself could not keep up with them. Before midnight the three landed in front of the couple's bedchamber. The wife had then been dreaming of being in her husband's arms and on hearing the knock on the door and her husband's voice she woke up, disconcerted. When she opened the door, she saw her husband standing in the moonlight, smiling. The swan couple fluttered close by. Could the moon have created such a wondrous illusion?

The four entered the bedchamber. The swans narrated the story of the Brahminy ducks. The wife then lit a ghee lamp and, unmindful of the presence of the swans, the couple devoted themselves to Kamdev. At the auspicious hour, the wife conceived.

The son felt that his father would be angry if he saw him there, so before the night was over, the three started their journey back to Mansarovar. The wife's dream was fulfilled and she blessed the swans for making her cherished desire come true.

Yet, don't crows masquerade as humans in most villages? If people's desires were to be fulfilled despite their being around, who would listen to their cawing? When a perceptive midwife gave the good news of the daughter-in-law's

condition, the worthies gathered round, crowing and cawing. Long has sethji settled the disputes of others, they said. When he has to settle something that has befallen his own house, his eyes will open. Sethji sees the fire on the mountain but is blind to the one licking the soles of his feet.

This sort of talk was bound to reach the seth's ears. Some rival seths had started simmering with old hatred. The seth was vehement, all this was a lie. The truth would come out when the daughter-in-law herself was asked.

Asking the daughter-in-law this was hardly going to take a year, the panch said. And in any case, the truth was bound to come out one way or the other. How can a pregnant belly remain hidden? A woman's stomach can neither hold secrets nor babies. The child would come out in the ninth month and it could be asked, at leisure, whose seed it was.

Seething with anger, the seth walked up to the daughter-in-law. She was already aware of all that was going on. The father-in-law put his hand on her head and said, 'You are like my own daughter. Don't hide anything from me. Tell me the meaning of this rumour.'

The daughter-in-law had a clear conscience and she narrated the entire episode to her father-in-law. Stunned, he said, 'Daughter, will any human believe this? They have got an opportunity to malign me and they will not spare us.'

The young woman's heart sank. Would untruth win over truth? 'Don't you believe me?' she asked.

The seth nodded his head and said, 'What is the use of my believing you? People think differently.'

The helpless seth tried his best to explain, but no panch believed the story that had no head or tail. Which wise man would believe a story as ridiculous as this! The village headman said, 'Sethji, so far you have ruined many lives in the name of justice. They are all ready to settle their accounts with you now. Take my advice, accept the allegation and turn your daughter-in-law out of the house. The matter will not be

discussed once her face is blackened. Or else it is beyond me to safeguard your prestige.'

The seth spoke softly, 'I am ready to give any amount as compensation. Don't punish my virtuous daughter-in-law. She will die if she hears of this.'

The community members were wordly-wise. They responded appropriately, 'All those born will die one day. Living honourably is more important. Either turn the daughter-in-law out or else be ready to face social boycott.'

No amount of tears and pleadings melted the seth's heart. He left her on a deserted road. A woman, forsaken by her in-laws, is not welcome even in her parents' house. What poison had the auspicious hour brought?

The road and the jungle were deserted. There was no hope for the future. She wondered how she should choose to die?

Following her shadow by the light of the sun and the moon, she meandered to her in-laws' house. Foaming with rage, her father-in-law asked, 'Aren't you ashamed to show this blackened face of yours?'

The daughter-in-law sobbed, 'I haven't done any thing shameful.'

'Whose seed are you carrying then?'

'Your son's.'

The seth was offended and said, 'Your duplicity will not work here. If you were so keen to live in this mansion, you should have exercised self-control. There is no place here for a whore like you.'

The daughter-in-law folded her hands and pleaded, 'Tell me, where can I go by myself?'

'You should have asked this of your lover,' taunted the seth.

With this he slammed the door shut. Once, at this very door, she had been welcomed with auspicious songs and today it had been closed on her forever. It was futile to plead and cry. With her eyes open she could see the mansion, so she closed her eyes and turned her back on it and silently kept

going in whichever direction her feet took her, silently cursing the crows! God only knew what sins of some past life they had taken revenge on her for! Who knows how many bright lives will be darkened by the blackness of the crows?

She was passing by a potter's door with her eyes shut when the potter woman held her hand and asked, 'Where are you going with your eyes closed thus?'

'I don't know it myself, how can I tell you?' responded the woman with her eyes still closed.

The potter woman said, 'There is no need to answer right away. I am your mother and you are my daughter and only a mother's door can be reached with closed eyes.'

Sympathy brought tears to her eyes. When she opened them she saw an old woman standing there. She had a wrinkled face, a toothless mouth and coir-like white hair. Her closed eyes had led her to shelter—with her eyes open she would surely have fallen into a well.

Three years had gone by since the death of the master of the house, the old woman's husband. She had seven married sons and a courtyard full of grandchildren but no daughter. The rustic potter's home lacked the luxuries of a rich man's house, yet the old lady felt rejuvenated by the presence of a daughter and loved her dearly. The young woman also worked hard, grinding, cleaning, watering, feeding and milking the cattle.

The sun that rises also sets and once it sets also rises. Soon it was the end of the ninth month of the young woman's pregnancy. One midnight, pain shot through her and the young woman called out to wake up the mother.

With the sun's first rays, a son was born to her. The old woman cut the umbilical cord with her own hands and started rattling a copper plate to indicate the birth of a boy. She began dancing to its music, happy like a child.

As the child was massaged, some spit came out of his mouth and turned into a pearl. The old woman was extremely surprised. What was the child spitting out that looked like

smooth, white pebbles? When she asked the young woman, she was told the whole story.

Yet, the potter's sons were not convinced with the story about pearls. They ran to the goldsmith. When he looked at the pearls, he was amazed. As the goldsmith's intentions became deceitful, he smiled sarcastically, 'So, you are trying to fool me? Tell me, from where did you steal the pearls or else I will take you to the king.'

The potter's elder son replied, 'What will we get from lying to you? You can keep the pearls if you covet them so, or else you can accompany me to verify the truth yourself.' The goldsmith didn't believe the sons but he indifferently accompanied them. He couldn't believe his eyes when he saw the truth.

Gladly promising to pay a hundred gold coins for every pearl, the goldsmith returned. The potter's family members too were happy, but the young woman's mind was lost in a whirlpool of memories. Where was her husband, her in-laws, her parents? She had never even dreamt of such trauma. Even the bright light of the sun failed to show her anything beyond the present moment. Had she known the future, would she have let her husband go back that night! But in the face of greed and his parents' disapproval, her husband too was afraid. He had quietly arrived past midnight and left before dawn.

Everybody pursues his own interest in this world. Had one time to spare from this selfishness, one would think of others. The goldsmith's heart was in turmoil after witnessing the uncanny phenomena of pearls coming out of the child's phlegm. He would make a hefty profit even after paying a hundred gold coins for each pearl. He could amass wealth for seven generations in a single day. Greed is a deadly vice, it has no limits. If only he could get hold of the child, then he would be absolved of the blemish of being childless and as an added boon he would get a cache of shining pearls too! He would then have access to the king.

If god hadn't granted him this timely good fortune, how could he have come up with these ideas? The goldsmith's wife began to visit the potter woman's home everyday pretending to borrow buttermilk and began playing with the child. Once thus engaged, she hid the child in her chunari and ran back to her husband. He was ready with a fast camel and taking the child in her lap they sped off with the speed of a hurricane.

The goldsmith reached the royal palace, bowed to the king and put forward his plea. Folding his hands, he pleaded, 'My lord, I am here seeking sanctuary at your feet. Save me, your highness, please save me!'

The king pacified him and asked why he needed sanctuary. The goldsmith said that he had five children who were all eaten up by a witch who was pursuing them. How could they leave the home of their ancestors? Where would they go? How long could a mother's heart suffer! When the wife had stopped eating he had to come to the king. They had no courage to hand over the sixth child to the witch and were ready to bear whatever punishment was accorded to them for this. The bloodthirsty witch, he said, was still pursuing them.

The king was touched on hearing the goldsmith's woes. Everyone in the court was stunned. The king himself wiped away the goldsmith's tears. He issued orders to the *diwan*, the minister, to strengthen the guard for all hours of the day. If any unknown woman came, she had to be produced in the court first. The goldsmith felt secure after gaining the king's protection.

The next day he bought a three-storey mansion and began to live in luxury. He gifted one pearl to the king everyday. The king began to value the goldsmith more than the *diwan* and gave him a powerful position in the court.

In complete contrast to this, there was no end to the sufferings of the young woman and the family of the potter. Constant crying had dried her tears. The lightning of

misfortune would not have struck her, if her son did not have the strange ability to cough up pearls. The potter woman's sons too were distraught. How would they make up for the loss of hundred gold coins per pearl? The seven brothers looked in all directions but failed to trace the goldsmith. When they gave up, the potter woman took the young woman with her and started looking for him. They asked everyone on the way—even birds, animals, stones, rocks and plants—but there was no trace of the goldsmith anywhere. The young woman was now running from pillar to post looking for the very child whose conception had snatched away her home and hearth. The sons moaned the loss of the gold coins and the mother her child.

Once again, she hardened her heart and approached her in-laws' home. Her husband had returned with a cartload of precious pearls from Mansarovar. When he had come to know of the injustice accorded to his wife by the community, he raved and ranted. He had insisted again and again that the fact about the auspicious moment was absolutely true. He himself had come flying on a swan to his wife. He had gone back the same night fearing his father's anger. The father taunted him saying that it was no easy task to save the family's honour. The son should have taken advice from the community elders before making up such an improbable excuse.

The son got irritated and said, 'I would hit such worthless elders a hundred times with a shoe. I am not their subordinate to be afraid of them. I was away for six months and you threw my innocent young wife out of the house. Tell me, who will I sleep with now?'

This vulgarity shamed the father. He turned his back and said, 'Son, why should you worry about this? If you wish, you can be married this very evening. There is no dearth of women for you.'

'What if you turn her out of the house too when I am away for business? How can I trust you? I won't live with

you and now you cannot expect even one pearl from the cartload I have brought,' admonished the son. He then remarried and lived separately from his father.

One well's water can be sweet, another's bitter; yet all quench thirst. Similarly, in spite of being different in beauty and temperament, all women give similar pleasure in bed. Just when the seth's son was engrossed with his second wife, he saw the first one standing at his door. When the eccentric husband recognized her, he asked, 'Why have you come to me after tramping over the whole country? I am not as much of a fool as you think. You are of no use to me now.'

At first she could hardly believe her ears. What is it that she was hearing from her own husband's lips? Yet, she wished to unburden her heart for once. 'Why? Do you too hold me guilty even when you know the whole truth?' she asked puzzled.

'Shouldn't I? Am I scared of you? When my father turned you out, you should have hit your head and died on the threshold of this house rather than stepping out of its boundaries. I am not one to drink leftover water,' he said.

Extending her hands to his feet, the wife pleaded, 'No one has touched this water except you. The child, for whom I went through such indignities, is lost. A goldsmith's wife cheated me for the pearls from his mouth. I don't covet your bed. There are many chores in this household. This home would not grudge two meals to me in return for mopping and cleaning the mansion. I am born a woman due to sins committed in some past life. It is hard for me to survive without the support of a husband in this world.'

With this she began sobbing bitterly. But the husband's heart did not melt. Forgetting his old passion for her, he told her scornfully, 'Your theatrics will not beguile me. If you live in this house, you would make my new wife jealous. It is bad enough for a woman to be out of her home even for one night, and god alone knows who you have been with all this time. No matter how much you beg and cry, no man will

believe you. Forget the mansion; you cannot live even in this village.'

These words upset her so much that she didn't want to implore any further. Wiping her tears, she turned away silently as if she had just woken up from some dream. It was surprising that the contempt meted out to her the third time did not hurt her as much. Sita, the virtuous wife of Lord Rama, was sent to the wilderness only once and here was this Sita who had been thrown into the wilderness thrice. Rejected by her own husband, she was now completely alone.

Yet, how could she rest without finding the one born of her own womb? With the sun in one hand and the moon and the stars in another, she stumbled around here and there, but could not find any trace of her son. Finally, she reached the king's court. The goldsmith recognized her at first sight—with her arrival, his worst fears were coming true. Folding his hands, he said to the king, 'My lord, the witch is here and now my son's life is entirely in your hands.'

What danger could touch him when the king was his saviour! Besides, an offering of one pearl a day was a major incentive. The mother's supplications were not heard and the king ordered the hangmen to kill her instantly.

The wise diwan suggested that it would not suffice to hang an evil woman only once. It would be better to sell her into prostitution, enrich the treasury and make her suffer daily. Lakhu, the prostitute's beauty was on the wane. She would happily pay a lakh rupees for this dissolute woman. After all, one has to think about enhancing the treasury too.

This idea seemed perfect to the king. Lakhu, the chief prostitute, had an eye for beauty. She paid a lakh without negotiating. The diwan was duly rewarded and Lakhu owned a woman of pristine beauty and youth in return for her money. Both parties were happy with the arrangement.

Even the declining sun does not forsake its brightness! Similarly, Lakhu was still beautiful even in the twilight of her youth. Yet when she saw the young woman she blessed

her against the evil eye and added, 'My misconceptions about my own beauty are dispelled today. It is an insult to a beauty such as yours to be tied down to one person.'

Initially, the young woman failed to understand Lakhu's potent words. She had got nothing but scorn wherever she went but Lakhu had at least evaluated her worth! Timidly she expressed her doubt, saying, 'Even hell will not spare a place for me if I take this dissolute road. This life of mine has gone waste, why should I spoil the next life too?'

This made Lakhu laugh. All women are simpletons. They live their entire life and die under this very fallacy. Controlling her mirth she asked, 'What could be a better way in this human world? I used to think in the same way. It is too early to explain things to you right now. Time and hardships are the best Vedas. I have ten girls here with me and no saga is greater than their lives. Yet you have to understand that for yourself. Till that understanding dawns on you, I will give you another chance. It will not matter if I lose the money I paid for you. Go and visit your parents, in-laws and your maternal home. Do whatever you want. After this, very little explaining will be needed.'

The young woman asked, 'What if I do not come back?'

Lakhu smiled, 'That is up to you. You have full freedom to do what you like. I bargain for a woman's body, not for her life.'

The young woman stared wide-eyed at Lakhu's face. Such kind words from a prostitute! It was as if a sharp needle had been poked into a ripe boil. Tears began streaming down her eyes. But Lakhu hated women's tears. 'I am sick of tears. I'm not strong enough at this age to bear them. Don't cry. Tears are a woman's undoing. They are the biggest enemy we have,' she said irritably.

The young woman said in a choked voice, 'I have to unburden my heart.'

Lakhu stopped her in mid-sentence, 'Why do you need unburdening? I have had enough of these tedious tales. I can't

bear to listen to them. But, if you are keen, tell it to me when you return. Then, when you talk, I'll be all ears. I already know what there is in the hearts of all women. Go now. I have given this chance to all the girls. Only three committed suicide because some foolish ideas still persisted in their heads. The rest of them came back straight to me and not one of them ever cheated me. What is the need for deception in a prostitute's home! Family homes are more suitable for that,' said Lakhu.

At these words, the web clouding the young woman's eyes seemed to be disappearing slowly. She turned her face and said, 'I don't want to go anywhere from here now.'

Lakhu said, 'No, my heart will not accept that. I believe that one should neither work under coercion nor coerce others. I am telling you once again. Come back only if you wish to. Paying for you was no obligation on you because I had the money and I did what I had to. My doors are open for you all times of the day. Without hesitation, come whenever you want. If you don't want to return, it is no problem.'

The young woman left with a heavy heart. Surely, her mother and her father, who had given birth to her, could not turn their faces away from her! One's own blood never severed relations. A child can be bad, not so the mother. After all, she had used up her own flesh and blood to give life to her. Yet, she was hesitant to approach her parents. She asked the way to her mother's house and went there first. The news of their niece's deeds had already reached there. Such things travel faster than air. Even the sudden sight of a tiger would not have so paled the faces of her maternal uncle and aunt, as did the sight of their niece. At first they refused to recognize her. When she introduced herself, they humiliated and insulted her. Though she did not have high hopes from them, she had not expected to hear what she did. The maternal uncle said, 'All relationships are maintained as per customs. The ways of the world cannot be overlooked. Didn't you come across any wells or ponds on the way to jump into and drown

yourself? What need was there to come here when a length of rope would have been enough to hang yourself with?'

Just then a dog jumped up for bread. The uncle kicked it out of the way and said viciously, 'Out, out you go.'

The hint was sufficient for her. She turned away without a second glance at her maternal home. My mother will certainly embrace me and love me, she thought. Like always, when she sees me, she will plant a kiss on my forehead and cheeks.

But her hopes proved futile there too. Though the mother recognized her, she did not rush forward with love. She wrinkled her brow as she spoke, 'It would have been better to carry a stone in my womb than one like you! Why have you come here with your cursed face! Even death has shunned you. If you have any trace of shame left, you would go and drown yourself in a handful of water. You have put your mother's milk to shame!'

With this the mother began calling out to the street dogs. When they came wagging their tails she began feeding them with bread fried in butter. They say, feeding the dogs during the moonless phase is auspicious and counts as a good deed for a human being.

These words stunned the daughter. What humiliation when she had expected love and care! As she had come, so she went away—silently.

Hearing the argument, her father too came out leaving his prayers halfway. Counting the beads of the rosary, he asked, 'Who were you getting angry at? I have told you many times to be more patient with those who come to beg for buttermilk. Surely buttermilk can be spared for the poor and needy.'

The mother held her head in her hand and spoke drily, 'Does she look like one who has come asking for buttermilk? My dear husband, don't you recognize the daughter you raised with your own hands? This is your own loving daughter!'

He said through clenched teeth, 'But why has she come

here? Don't you have a shoe to hit her with?'

The daughter turned back and spoke, trying to smile weakly, 'Do that too if you wish.'

When the father could not gather enough courage to do so, the mother said, 'You shameless wretch, why are you laughing?' Then she turned to her husband and said, 'If you had hit her earlier, this day wouldn't have come. Your love has spoiled her.' The father would not take the blame and said, 'Had it not been for your pampering, she wouldn't have been this spoilt.'

As they began bickering, the daughter quietly slipped away. Now it was only death or Lakhu. When she had no control over her birth, why beg for death now? In this wide world only one home showed a ray of hope to her. She went straight to Lakhu and rattled the door chain loudly. Lakhu opened the door and said, 'I knew you would be back. I had full faith in your intelligence. Now my seat will not remain unoccupied—I am relieved. These girls here do not have as much brains as you.'

What was Lakhu raving about? Was her compliment a matter of shame or pride? Yet, there was no trace of any sarcasm in her voice. Her words were straightforward and simple. 'Why did you then let me go?' asked the young woman.

Closing the door, Lakhu said, 'It was required. Understanding does not come by hearing alone. Perhaps no more explanation is needed now. You bathe and rest and I will listen to your story after dinner.'

The young woman did not say anything. There was a storm raging in her heart. No matter how knowledgeable a man may be, he cannot even begin to fathom the stirrings in the depths of a woman's heart. It would be futile for him to even try.

After dinner the young woman said, 'There is no point in telling my story now. The desire to have my say is gone.'

Along with Lakhu, ten girls surrounded the young woman.

One girl said, 'It is a tradition here that when you enter the doors of this home again, you have to tell the others all that has happened. The accountant notes it all in his register.'

The young woman took a deep sigh. 'My story would have been different but for the evil claws of the crows over my destiny. They ruined everything.'

'No daughter, though one story is similar to another, it does seem different to us. The sum total of stories of all the women in this world is only one—be cheated by men and to pay for it all one's life. No woman is spared this. This grim reality is however hidden by the illusions of family and home.'

After this, the young woman narrated the shocking saga of how the crows from the Thar Desert misguided the swans from Mansarovar and brought them to their land. Starting with the swans' ill-fated journey, one by one, she divulged all the details of her story till her arrival at Lakhu's place. This time her eyes did not fill with tears at all. She had not forgotten the irritation Lakhu felt on such occasions. By now she also knew that tears did not alter anything, they just offered false solace. She could now understand Lakhu's impatience with tears.

Lakhu spoke after the young woman's story was over, 'Daughter! Religion, devotion, welfare, non-violence, rituals, traditions, faith are all fake. The only truth is "the crow's way". All the scholars, sages, avatars, prophets and holy men outdo each other in following the way of the crows. Self-service is the ultimate service. Everything else is deceit and hypocrisy. The poison of the crow's deceit is rampant all over the world. The community leaders were unjust even though you were carrying your husband's seed. You will begin to understand the black deeds of men to some extent when you read our ledgers. Some women carry their father's seed, some their brother's, uncle's, brothers-in-law's, nephew's or maternal uncle's seed in their womb. They seek pleasure together, yet a woman goes through the ordeal all by herself. There is no escape from this harsh reality. Nature is impartial

to human relations. Men lose their balance when the truth is exposed. How much of man-created filth exists behind the facade of sunshine, you will see here.

'It is forbidden to see this through the eyes of a householder. What is pious for a family man is profane here. What they hold blasphemous is our religion. The rotten beliefs of a household have to be discarded here else they will give you pain. What is done on the sly there, is done openly here. Whosoever walks in with money in his pocket has the right to bed a woman. No relationships based on caste, creed or families are nurtured. One has to take a vow to this effect to maintain the ethics of our profession. Initially these things seem hard to swallow; yet gradually they become easier. It is difficult to get rid of deeply-rooted attitudes. I also took a long time to grasp these things. I had to suffer a lot because of my father's black deeds. My protestations came to nothing as nobody listened to me. Ultimately, when I came into the flesh trade, a revelation dawned on me. The cover of misconceptions was removed from my eyes.'

The essence of a new 'Geeta' was explained thus by Lakhu and, like Arjun, the young woman listened quietly. As per Lakhu's instructions, she vowed to be true to the profession.

The next day, past midnight, the diwan was on his way towards Lakhu's brothel. The young woman's beauty had smitten him when he had seen her at the king's court. Today, when Lakhu sent him a message, he arrived promptly.

The young woman sat in the bedroom all decked up from head to toe. Lamps illumined the room and memories of her own wedding night glimmered in the radiance of the lamps. That too was a night of pleasure and so shall this be a night of pleasure. Yet, how different these two were!

The diwan was dead drunk. The young woman was not used to the smell of alcohol. Her head reeled with the first stinking breath. She felt nauseous and requested him to come the next day. But he did not listen—after all, she had been bought for a price. The diwan enjoyed the love-making and

gifted her an expensive ring. Could there be such a high price for just one night?

He had come under the shadow of the night and left before daybreak. Lakhu came after he left the young woman and they looked deep into each other's eyes. Finally Lakhu spoke, 'For about ten nights or so you will find all this difficult and then it will become easier.'

The young woman said slowly, 'The smell of liquor chokes me. It would be better if such persons are not allowed to come.'

'This is beyond our control. You will get used to this smell, but many other smells will pursue you even in your dreams. Try and avoid those. Certain big people will talk of marriage to you. They will make a display of their love, but don't let it ever convince you. Do you know that the diwan already has five wives? Expressing love for a woman is child's play for men. Today you have an invitation from the king's palace. You'll be amazed to know that he has sixteen queens. There are no restrictions or limitations for these people. Don't hesitate to make a show of love to them, but don't be bogged down in this quagmire. Heed this special advice—love for none, scorn for none.'

In the evening, a sixteen-horse chariot came to fetch her. Lakhu adorned herself with diamonds and pearls. Moving to the rhythmic sound of hoofs, the chariot reached the king's pleasure palace. Holding decorated fans in their hands, four maids escorted her to a golden bed.

After a while the king stumbled in, dead drunk. Each time he tripped and almost fell, the maids held him. Soon enough he collapsed as he touched the velvet bed. The two maids began to immediately press his feet.

That day's spectacle did not remind her of any other night. She kept looking on at the happenings around her, stunned.

Half the night was spent like this. Finally desire awakened in the king and he began groping. One maid stood at the head of the bed and the other at the feet. The young woman

doubled over with shame. The king's tongue had thickened as he spoke, stammering and stuttering, 'These are my own maids. Why be shy of them? They wait upon me the whole night like this.'

The king wanted to say something more, but he couldn't. With a hiccup, he vomited on the young woman's face. The half-open bodice, breasts and her face were all filled with the muck. Feeling thoroughly disgusted she quickly got off the bed. The king vomited a couple of more times and then sprawled on the bed. The two maids changed the bed linen, his clothes and cleaned his beard and moustache. The king remained unconscious through all of this.

When the young woman wished to change her clothes and wash her face, one of the maids tried to explain to her, 'Showing repulsion to the king's vomit is to invite death. Didn't Lakhu explain this to you?'

Repulsion is involuntary, it can hardly be controlled. With her head splitting, the young woman said angrily, 'Death does not seek anybody's permission. It comes suddenly, unannounced. It does not spare either king or subject.'

In spite of the maid's warning, she washed her face repeatedly and cleaned her bodice. Her garments were only half dry when she gathered courage to say, 'My lord is not conscious as yet. What would I do here? And I am not feeling too well today. Please arrange to send me home.'

The maids' eyes widened with horror on hearing her words. One said, 'Who knows what time my lord will wake up. You do not seem to have learnt enough good manners to remain humble in the king's presence.'

What could she say beyond this? She kept going over Lakhu's advice in her mind and stood motionless like a puppet.

Even when daylight began to spread dimly in the pleasure palace, the king did not wake up. An hour and a half went by. Finally, when three hours had gone by, the king awoke from his wine-induced sleep. After looking in turn at the

two maids, his eyes fell on the young woman. Yawning, he asked, 'Who is this new girl?'

One maid reminded him of the happenings of the previous night. Though the king couldn't remember a thing, he got up with a start and said, 'Why didn't you wake me up if this was so? Lakhu had sent me such a precious gift and you did not pay any attention to it!'

The maids begged his pardon and told him about the young woman's behaviour. He waved to the young woman to come closer and observed, 'Every pore of her body drips with remarkable beauty.'

Remembering Lakhu's teaching, the young woman snuggled close to the king. Fondling her cheeks, the king ordered the maids to stand facing each other as usual.

Even the light of the sun could not deter the king now. Ashamed, the sun itself hid its face behind a cloud. The young woman had to fulfil the vows of her trade. The king was too drunk with his own power to differentiate between the light and the dark.

Like the diwan, the king too enjoyed the love-making. Smitten with her he gave a necklace studded with all the nine precious gems as bakshish. Then he lured her to become his prime queen but she could not be persuaded. She explained the ethics of her trade to him. The king immediately understood what she was saying when Lakhu's name was mentioned. She further refused an invitation to be his paramour for seven days. Her trade forbade her to spend two nights continuously with the same man. She would rather die than break the rules. The king was so enamoured of her beauty that he ordered his maid to send the chariot to fetch her on alternate days.

As soon as she got off the chariot, the young woman went running to Lakhu. She wrapped her arms around her and broke down crying. Lakhu caressed her back, 'Don't cry, my daughter, I know your sorrow. It is routine with the king to vomit thus and fall unconscious. Though it is new for you,

my daughter, within a few days you will get used to it. Married women tolerate such vomiting everyday and instead of getting precious necklaces, they are beaten with shoes. Is there any justification for their bad luck?

The young woman sobbed, 'What have I to do with others? How long will I console myself with these facts?'

Lakhu spoke sharply, 'Away with your talk of consolation. Such mean instances in men are our biggest treasure. These poor necklaces stand nowhere in comparison to this possession. Don't be repulsed by vomit—accept it as an infinite opportunity.'

And thus seventeen years passed by—accepting every day the riches Lakhu had advised. It was fortunate that time did not wither the young woman's beauty and youth. Her face acquired a new vibrancy with experience and the very air itself was filled with talk of her beauty.

The goldsmith's son was not oblivious to the talk. He too got the wind of her exquisite beauty. Tall and handsome, he was in the prime of youth. Making an excuse of going out with his friends to his father, he went and knocked at Lakhu's brothel. Promptly a girl climbed down and opened the door.

He followed the girl who took him to Lakhu. Who else could tackle strangers? When it came to discussing the payment he smiled and said, 'Don't talk of money! Others who step into this door have to first assess their pocket. As for me, I cough out rubies. One ruby is worth one and a quarter lakh. Coughing does not cost me anything.'

Lakhu's ears pricked up with the words. She asked some questions and soon confirmed the young man's identity. In the meanwhile, the woman was all decked up with ornaments and was peering at her own image in the mirror.

Today Lakhu's training was to be put to test. Climbing each step thoughtfully, Lakhu reached the woman's bedchamber. With a penetrating look at her beautiful face she began, 'Daughter, today this chamber's integrity is in your hands. Today your own flesh and blood has come to seek

pleasure from your beautiful body. Don't retrace your steps because he is your son. He will pay for you with the priceless rubies he coughs out.'

The woman sprang up like a snake that had been disturbed. Her eyes scanned Lakhu's wrinkled face.

But where was the time to ponder? Lakhu asked eagerly 'So, daughter, should I send him to your room?'

As if in a trance, the beautiful woman spoke, 'Of course. Send him in. Will I ever come across a more precious night?'

f o u r

the slough

Stagnant water rots, flowing water stays pure. To each his view and to each his perspective. May the sea of kindness grant god and human, friend and foe, good sense.

Somewhere, on an estate, lived a Gujjar family. They bred Rendi cows and Bhavatara buffaloes. Milk and yoghurt flowed more freely than water, and all the pitchers of ghee were full. The villagers got as much whey as they needed. The young Gujjar living there looked like the god Issar himself—fair, well-sculpted and strong-bodied. He wore a broad, bordered pugree, a dhoti with red piping, angarkhi with piping, gold earrings, tiger-mouth silver anklets, embroidered, colourful shoes and carried a wooden staff as tall as himself, embellished with copper wire with the edges sealed with silver.

When he reached the right age, on an auspicious day, his bride—to whom he had been married in their childhood—was brought home. News spread that such beauty had never been seen or heard of. The two were likened to the divine pair of Issar and Gangaur.

The Gujjari's body seemed to have been moulded from milk, yoghurt and butter. Whoever saw her, was speechless with wonder at how such a small frame contained such beauty, as if all of nature had taken shelter in her body. Her name, Laachi, filled the mouth, reverberated in the heart and dissolved on the tongue like nectar.

Laachi's beauty was much discussed and eventually reached

the thakur's ears. He called Bhoja Kanvaria, his estate supervisor, and asked, 'Bhoja, have you heard anything new?'

Bhoja was very clever, gifted enough to bring down the stars, if need be. He was perceptive and didn't need everything spelled out for him to understand. He was dark complexioned and possessed a set of fine teeth. Not too good looking or downright ugly, he looked like how a human being should. Without asking for any more information, he said, 'Only hearing about these things doesn't help, I have seen her with my own eyes.'

The thakur felt reassured. Bhoja could never be wrong, at least in these matters. The Thakur asked impatiently, 'So, it really is the truth?'

'No, provider, it's a lie.'

'A lie?'

'Yes, provider, a lie. The tongue may try and try, but describing such beauty is beyond its feeble powers. Laachi is her own parallel. It's only because of the miracle that is her body that it can withstand beauty such as hers. The day burning coal can be bundled in a towel will be the day such beauty can be contained by a mere human body.'

The thakur listened open mouthed as Bhoja continued, 'I saw her when she was coming back from the well with her friends, a pitcher on her head. She looked like a moon among dung cakes. For a minute, I did not believe my eyes but, eventually, reality hit home. Laachi made me realize that for so many years you have only wasted your time chasing the weak reflection of womanhood and all my efforts at serving you have gone waste.'

The thakur slowly said, 'So, now . . .?'

Excited, Bhoja cut off the thakur mid-sentence, saying, 'There is no need for me to tell you this but she is a different dish altogether. This lioness will not be easy to capture. But death is the only insurmountable difficulty. The day Laachi climbs on to your bed will be the day my quest completes.'

As soon as Bhoja said this, it bothered him a little; but that

sud, ^{oden}, unexpected bother remained unknown even to him. The thakur stopped him, saying, 'Enough. You have so inflamed my desire that I can concentrate on nothing else. I depend on you solely now.'

He had unwavering faith in Bhoja who, he felt, was a master at bringing such matters to fruition. Besides, who is a mere Gujjari to refuse the thakur. Rejection just did not make sense. The Gujjar was the master of the house while the Thakur owned the whole village. She may be beautiful yet Laachi remained a Gujjari, a mere tenant. For her to share the Thakur's bed would be a matter of pride!

Bhoja Kanvaria was a loner and a bachelor, patronized by the thakur. He pimped for the thakur and was satisfied with whatever crumbs came his way from the thakur's bed. Not a leaf moved without his approval in the village so everybody tried to keep him happy. The wiser ones went out of their way to supply him his pleasure separately. There is no morality greater than self-interest.

After Laachi came to the Gujjar's house, Bhoja's visits to the house increased. In any case he had been a frequent visitor even before the gauna. Initially, he would not even glance at Laachi, beauty like hers is visible otherwise too.

Bhoja had five or six sweethearts in the group of women who accompanied Laachi to the well. He tried to get some insight into Laachi's heart from these women. But, for a long time, he could not. Some said that she was naive and some labelled her clever. Some said that her brain did not match her beauty for she could neither understand words nor take any hints. She did not have eyes for anyone but her own husband. She would not gargle with any water other than the water in her pot. Who could have patience with such a woman?

Yet Bhoja said that they had to persist.

One of the women who was close to him smiled and said, 'We'll persist only if it serves your purpose.'

Bhoja responded promptly, 'The offering, unless it goes

to go to the god first, is no offering.'

Both parties would be all smiles then. There is no better question than a smile. There is no better answer than a smile.

After this, Bhoja's favourites tried to lure the innocent Gujjari but she had no desire to understand anything. Everything was milky white for her who was born and brought up in milk. If the milk of a black buffalo were white, why would human laughter and the human heart be black?

Bhoja whetted the thakur's appetite, but beyond that, all his efforts were futile. His favourites wore themselves out trying every trick they could think up but she didn't listen to anyone.

The thakur visited the Gujjar's house many times pretending to look at cattle. Laachi understood everything, but remained silent. How long could the plans of thakur remain hidden? And, inwardly, she fumed. The smell of burnt milk lingers even in the butter made from it, how could the dirt in the thakur's heart not stink?

Once, praising the cows, the thakur came over to her and asked, 'How many calves has his cow borne?'

Lachhi, who was holding a pitcher in one hand and a rope in the other, replied softly, 'I don't know exactly.'

Bhoja was standing nearby. He tried to capitalize on the situation saying, 'I feel that you don't know yourself. Forget yourself, you are not aware of anything.'

Laachi glanced at Bhoja and sat down to milk the cow.

Abashed, the two withdrew, pretending to talk. What a woman! She fails to heed the pride and the prestige of the village master. She feigns ignorance despite understanding everything.

Laachi was not worried. Each had his own quirks and each his nature. The five fingers on the hand too are not similar. She wanted to tell her husband about these advances, but did not. She who eats coals, blackens only her mouth.

Yet, those passionately pursuing something do not give up easily. Once, Laachi was standing in the cowshed. A cow

sudden, unexpected bother remained unknown even to him.

The thakur stopped him, saying, 'Enough. You have so inflamed my desire that I can concentrate on nothing else. I depend on you solely now.'

He had unwavering faith in Bhoja who, he felt, was a master at bringing such matters to fruition. Besides, who is a mere Gujjari to refuse the thakur. Rejection just did not make sense. The Gujjar was the master of the house while the Thakur owned the whole village. She may be beautiful yet Laachi remained a Gujjari, a mere tenant. For her to share the Thakur's bed would be a matter of pride!

Bhoja Kanvaria was a loner and a bachelor, patronized by the thakur. He pimped for the thakur and was satisfied with whatever crumbs came his way from the thakur's bed. Not a leaf moved without his approval in the village so everybody tried to keep him happy. The wiser ones went out of their way to supply him his pleasure separately. There is no morality greater than self-interest.

After Laachi came to the Gujjar's house, Bhoja's visits to their house increased. In any case he had been a frequent visitor even before the gauna. Initially, he would not even glance at Laachi, beauty like hers is visible otherwise too.

Bhoja had five or six sweethearts in the group of women who accompanied Laachi to the well. He tried to get some insight into Laachi's heart from these women. But, for a long time, he could not. Some said that she was naive and some labelled her clever. Some said that her brain did not match her beauty for she could neither understand words nor take any hints. She did not have eyes for anyone but her own husband. She would not gargle with any water other than the water in her pot. Who could have patience with such a woman?

Yet Bhoja said that they had to persist.

One of the women who was close to him smiled and said, 'We'll persist only if it serves your purpose.'

Bhoja responded promptly, 'The offering, unless it goes

to go to the god first, is no offering.'

Both parties would be all smiles then. There is no better question than a smile. There is no better answer than a smile.

After this, Bhoja's favourites tried to lure the innocent Gujjari but she had no desire to understand anything. Everything was milky white for her who was born and brought up in milk. If the milk of a black buffalo were white, why would human laughter and the human heart be black?

Bhoja whetted the thakur's appetite, but beyond that, all his efforts were futile. His favourites wore themselves out trying every trick they could think up but she didn't listen to anyone.

The thakur visited the Gujjar's house many times pretending to look at cattle. Laachi understood everything, but remained silent. How long could the plans of thakur remain hidden? And, inwardly, she fumed. The smell of burnt milk lingers even in the butter made from it, how could the dirt in the thakur's heart not stink?

Once, praising the cows, the thakur came over to her and asked, 'How many calves has his cow borne?'

Lachhi, who was holding a pitcher in one hand and a rope in the other, replied softly, 'I don't know exactly.'

Bhoja was standing nearby. He tried to capitalize on the situation saying, 'I feel that you don't know yourself. Forget yourself, you are not aware of anything.'

Laachi glanced at Bhoja and sat down to milk the cow.

Abashed, the two withdrew, pretending to talk. What a woman! She fails to heed the pride and the prestige of the village master. She feigns ignorance despite understanding everything.

Laachi was not worried. Each had his own quirks and each his nature. The five fingers on the hand too are not similar. She wanted to tell her husband about these advances, but did not. She who eats coals, blackens only her mouth.

Yet, those passionately pursuing something do not give up easily. Once, Laachi was standing in the cowshed. A cow

had come into heat. She began mooing, indicating her readiness. The bull heard and, sensing the ready cow, ran to her. The thakur and Bhoja were looking for such an opportunity. Laachi, busy with her work, was unconsciously making encouraging sounds at the bull.

When she turned back she saw thakur and Bhoja there, smiling shamelessly. At first she was taken aback, but then she deliberately turned her back to them and continued calling the bull, as before. Why should she be ashamed of something so natural? Why should she be embarrassed in front of these shameless men?

The opportunity coincidence creates comes but once, and, if missed, never returns. So why would Bhoja control his tongue? He said, 'Laachi, you are so concerned about the welfare of this bull, yet you don't think about the Thakur sahib at all. He has been pining for you for so long.'

Laachi heard every word clearly. All the recent incidents flared in front of her eyes. Eyes brimming with rage, she looked at the two. An immodest, repulsive smile was pasted on the thakur's lips. What the smile implied was much more disgusting than Bhoja's words. That such a smile could touch human lips! It felt as if every pore of her body burnt. Forgetting all boundaries between master and subject, she lunged at the thakur, raised her arm and elbowed him so hard that he fell, unconscious. Even the ever-clever Bhoja's brain failed him and, unable to think of anything, sat down next to his supine master and began rubbing his chest. Barely suppressing her mirth, Laachi went about her business, encouraging the bull.

Finally, because of the massage, the thakur recovered consciousness. He asked, 'Bhoja, what happened here?'

Bhoja responded, massaging the thakur's ribs, 'This is what happens if you have truck with low-born women. Consider it a bad dream. Have patience, she will come around. I have my finger on the pulse of these women.'

The thakur spoke in a low tone, 'You made a mistake with this one.'

Bhoja maintained, 'Master, it is not I but Laachi who has made a blunder. She does not understand the ways of this place.'

The thakur, who was having difficulty breathing, said haltingly, 'Tell me, should I get her ears and nose cut off and her teeth broken?'

'As you wish, master, but defiling her would only make her look ugly,' said Bhoja with folded hands.

'And what about my reputation?' asked the thakur.

'Nobody has seen this happen, master. Only I, you and Laachi know of this. With your permission, I could restrain Laachi from uttering a word about this to anybody. If she speaks of this even by mistake, it will be bad for her.'

'If only she would agree to that.'

'Forget her, even her shadow will have to agree.'

The thakur got up, brushing the dust off his clothes. He was in such a state that he could not order even Bhoja to dust his clothes. Bhoja slowly walked up to Laachi and said, 'You have made a terrible mistake, yet the large-hearted master has forgiven you. We will not talk about this incident to anyone and you too will keep quiet.'

This time Laachi could not control the laughter that erupted out of her. She guffawed loudly and kept on laughing for some time. Bhoja's nimble mind went once more into a spin. He beat a hasty retreat. The thakur too said nothing. Her laughter kept resonating in their ears long after she had stopped laughing.

The Gujjar came round after the cow had been pacified. Laachi ran to him, her bangles and armlets tinkling, the billowing lehanga fluttering. There was a smile on her lips, equal parts wonder, enthusiasm and excitement. She took her husband's wooden staff from him and, caressing it, said, 'If you promise me molasses and coconut sweets, I will tell you some good news.'

Tomorrow would mark the passing of a month since she had come to this house. And, she had already told him of her pregnancy. And, even then, she had not been so happy, a new mother is usually a little shy. What good news could this be? Perhaps she wished to convey the news again. What could make a woman happier than her first pregnancy! Running his hand over her cheek he reminded her, 'You have already given me this news.'

Swivelling her shapely neck, she said, 'No, this is something else. You promise me the molasses and coconut first.'

The Gujjar was puzzled but he smiled and said, 'You can have molasses and coconut every day, if you like it so much.'

'It is not about liking. It is about celebration.'

She then narrated the entire incident from the beginning till the point when the thakur fell unconscious. The husband listened to her silently, and in bewilderment. He could not digest the fact that after elbowing the thakur, and being pardoned for it, she had laughed so loudly. His face drained of all colour and, stunned, he said in a subdued tone, 'This is terrible. You should have at least kept the thakur's prestige in mind.'

When she heard these unexpected words, the happy, bubbling smile vanished from her lips as if an invisible hawk had snatched it away. She couldn't believe her ears. Not yet fully recovered from his shocking reaction, she blurted, 'Prestige! What prestige is there in this? I was so angry I could have wrung his neck.'

The husband was equally angry. Putting his palm on her mouth, he admonished her, 'Stop talking nonsense. Aren't you ashamed of saying such things? This is the master's nature, these minor things are normal with him.'

Laachi pulled her hand away, 'Do you think such things are minor frivolities?' Her eyes brimmed with tears and she couldn't speak any further.

The husband tried to reason with her, such madness was not advisable. The thakur had his ways and his subjects could

not govern him. How could one live in water and be enemies with the crocodile? One had to take each day as it came and survive using one's wits. This house was much favoured by the thakur and he had very good relations with Bhoja as well. Personal qualities, contacts and brains always win over mere good looks.

Laachi cried her heart out while the husband tried to reason with her. What had she expected from this youthful husband of hers and what did she find. What use was the wooden staff he carried? Was it just to hit dumb animals, to let out his frustration on them? Those whose pain remains unexpressed. Why would one use violence on beings weaker anyway? Weapons have meaning when used against one's equal or someone more powerful. Birds and animals are simple beings and with them, what you see is what you get. It is men who live in contradiction. They think one thing, say another and do something totally different. With humans what you get is the opposite of what you see. The regulations of home and community, caste and attitudes never free man from their restrictions.

Laachi did not respond. The husband assumed that her tears indicated remorse. He thought that she was still immature and that the hard knocks of life would soon teach her that to run a family was difficult and tricky. Caressing her, he asked, 'At least some part of my long sermon must have entered your brain.'

A subdued Laachi raised her head slightly and looked at her husband. She had not expected this from her husband even in her worst dreams. She dried her eyes and forced herself to smile. Her husband repeated his question, 'Did you understand or not?'

Her husband's fate was her fate. Where else could she go? She answered, 'Of course, I had to, sooner or later.'

The Gujjar felt great pride at his wisdom. He touched her chin and, pulling up her face, stared at it for a long time. He said, with a degree of pride, 'A heart of stone would be

enamoured with such beauty, how could the master keep himself in check. If you hadn't been so ravishing, this problem wouldn't have come up in the first place.'

'Being beautiful or ugly is beyond one's control.'

'One could at least be patient and persevere.'

The words seemed to wrench her heart. She teased her husband, 'If your courage fails you, I could burn my face.'

Her husband was furious, 'Such pride in one's beauty is not good. You cannot use a gold dagger to stab yourself! I could bring home twenty others like you to cook and make dung cakes, but where would I go without the thakur's blessings?'

Laachi realized that it was useless to carry the argument further. There was nothing left to say or hear. She joked, 'You are right, yet, so is the fact that my beauty is matchless.'

The husband said irritably, 'Just beauty is not enough to run a family. One has to be careful and shrewd.'

Laachi was not to be cowed down. She said sarcastically, 'If you permit me, may I sleep with the thakur in broad daylight?'

This was like adding a bundle of dry grass to fire. Gritting his teeth, he said, 'You wretched woman, when did I ask you to do that? And if you wanted to do it, could I stop you anyway? You have been talking too much, too long. If your scalp is itching, tell me, I can set it right.'

Talk creates more talk and talk suppresses more talk. Why would Laachi desist? She retorted, 'There is no manliness in setting my itching right; I had expected something different from your manhood. I have been cured of my expectations soon enough. Now, I will never complain to you about anybody. I have gained the wisdom of a thousand years in a single moment.'

Trying to recall something, the husband said, 'I had asked you to do some work and look what you got busy with. I even forgot to ask you, did Kabri cow mate or not?'

This is every milkman's prime duty and this is what the

delicate truth of the cattle shed is. Laachi picked up the broom lying nearby and began sweeping as she said, 'Yes, she has mated.'

She had come here to this place which was not her own leaving behind the trees and plants of her own home and her loving family and friends. There had been such happiness and such enthusiasm in her heart! In this one blast all the blossoms withered and the buds all burnt in their pods.

Yet, her beautiful body remained in perfect health. Her life immersed again in the routine, the household chores and the complications of milking, fetching water, cooking, cleaning, preparing fodder and the dung cakes. Day after day it was the same pots, pans and churning of milk and yogurt. Her bed and its pleasures remained as unchanged as everything else. Yet her heart was not in it—the lovers' dalliance had turned bitter. It seemed as if the man pummeling her flesh had turned into a mere scarecrow. If marriage was just this pumping of flesh, then why did they go through the ceremonies of the marriage, holding hands in front of the holy fire? Why were the auspicious songs sung before she set foot in the household? If the husband could not protect her at such a critical moment, why did she follow him home? What good were words like fight, anger, revenge and what was this well-oiled, strong wooden staff for? The thakur may be a master but only in his own house. God only knows how people give up their marriage beds. What use were such cowardly husbands? She had not accepted the subjugation of marriage for merely bread and clothing. Such despicable subsistence could be obtained through a thousand other ways. Why was there so much of celebration for this? An invisible churn rotated in her brain, whirr-whirr, as she churned the yogurt. Laachi's heart was so bitter she could appreciate nothing. There was no radiance in the sun, moon and stars for her. The whole world changed within a month of her coming to her husband's house.

She would smile and laugh to keep up pretences, but the

usual, milky white glow never returned to her face. It was awkward for her to refuse to have sex with her husband, but her heart always remained aloof.

The thakur still hadn't recovered from the elbowing he had received. Now and then he would say irritably to Bhoja Kanvaria, 'Has your mind rusted utterly? Haven't you found a way yet?'

Bhoja would plead with folded hands, 'Master, I had told you beforehand, this one is different. If the stars were like mere berries on trees, who would leave them alone. Goods like these are difficult to get hold of, master, but once in your hands will give you endless pleasure; so much pleasure that foregoing the kingdom of heaven for it would not be a bad bargain. Be patient, I will do everything in my power.'

The thakur heaved a sigh and observed, 'On this, Bhoja, I have complete trust.'

Yet, after witnessing the thakur faint in the cowshed, Bhoja was no more the old, trustworthy agent. He began, without any conscious decision on his part, to change slowly. The master of the village fell unconscious because of a blow struck by a mere woman and even after he had come to his senses, nothing had happened to the perpetrator of the crime. He realized that the thakur and the gods frighten those who get frightened. On the other hand, they are frightened of the one that intimidates them. With this new revelation, Bhoja's heart changed colour and he began to feel repulsed by this trading of flesh. In any case, it wasn't as if he had to feed many mouths, and such a despicable profession suited no man. Besides, all his tactics had proved utterly useless in luring an angelic beauty like Laachi. If this beauty would only lace her arms around his neck, he would renounce seven empires for her. To insult such beauty by attempting to solicit it would humiliate him even after he was dead.

As luck would have it, Bhoja once got an opportune moment. He was adept at treating the convulsions of animals and was called to attend the Gujjar's buffalo one day. The

Gujjar himself was in a hurry to get to the panchayat meeting, so he explained everything to Laachi and left.

Bhoja was caressing the struggling, convulsing buffalo when Laachi appeared with live charcoals in a pan. The sickle that was among the coals was burning a bright red. Bhoja caught hold of the sickle by the handle and placed it on the thigh of the buffalo. The animal writhed in pain for a bit and then calmed down and got up as if by magic. Laachi, who was scratching the earth with her toe, said, 'Your timely treatment saved the buffalo or she would have died a painful death.'

Bhoja said pertly, 'Like this buffalo, even my life is in your hands. You may spare it or end it.'

Laachi could not believe her ears that this man, after the incident at the cowshed, could say something like this. She had set right the master of the village himself, what chance did his minion have? The thakur had fainted; she could crush this man with merely half a blow. He knew this yet his daring knew no bounds. For a while she stared at him then, suppressing a smile, she asked, 'Have you forgotten that day?'

'I haven't, which is why I have dared. Death, from your hands, would be most welcome. Even the least fortunate have a share in the light of the sun; do I not have a right to even a fragment of your beauty?'

Laachi went back to scratching the earth with her toe. If her husband's lack of courage had not failed her, she would have disembowelled Bhoja for these words. Laachi's very being had changed since her husband's sermonizing. Every man is a chameleon inside and what he will change to, and when, is not in his control. She began to speculate furiously. She thought, he may not have reacted as the incident was only narrated to him. He would react, perhaps, if he saw something with his own eyes. This was the last chance for her to try her husband's loyalty. She turned her back as she said, 'Come to the barn after sunset two days later.'

How could Bhoja wait so long? Today the moon had risen on his palm. He said, excitedly, 'Can a man suffering

snake bite wait at all? Why not today? Even the almanacs cannot come up with a more auspicious moment,' he said.

'My auspicious moment will come only after three days,' snapped Laachi and walked away. Bhoja followed her, 'Laachi, you are the cure for my convulsion. If I don't get the brand today I will lose my life.'

Turning her back, Laachi said, 'Not today, the day after the day after tomorrow, in the barn.'

Bhoja was about to say something when he saw Laachi's mother-in-law approaching them. He had to be careful and as she came close, he ventured, 'Mother, the buffalo was cured as soon as I singed it with the sickle.'

The mother-in-law was satisfied. Smiling, she said, 'I had full faith in you. Here, have some sweets.'

Walking fast towards the thakur's castle, Bhoja said, 'I will have sweets only when brother Gujjar comes back.'

The mother in-law said, 'What a simple lad this Bhoja is! He has always been kind to us. The Kanwarias are the eyes and ears of the Thakurs. You should take proper care of Bhoja whenever he comes. Always offer him milk and yoghurt.'

Laachi agreed, saying, 'What worry have I as long as you are around. The elders of the family should handle these things.'

'That may be true but keeping these household tips in mind is useful,' said the mother-in-law.

In the evening, when Laachi sat down to milk the cows, she felt like the sea of happiness in her heart had all dried up. Her way of thinking had changed. Milking the fettered cow, she felt her heart sour. This cow used to turn around and drink her own milk which is why she had to be fettered. This is how household tips help. The calf couldn't get a bellyful of milk and these poor animals were given only grass to eat yet they gave milk like manna. Something clicked in Laachi's mind and she poured half a pot of milk into a pan and gave it to the cow. The bewildered cow looked at Laachi for a while and then began slurping the milk.

Like with the cow, was she being kind to Bhoja too? No, no, she wouldn't do such a thing even on the pain of death. It was a challenge to maintain a household's integrity. Yet, how could the Laachi, who had hit the Thakur on his chest with her elbow, invite Bhoja to come to the barn? Did she want to test her husband by inviting Bhoja to the barn or to sleep with Bhoja on the pretext of testing her husband? Where was this seeming sympathy with Bhoja hidden when she had felt such rage in the cowshed? It is not easy to accept certain revelations about oneself. Why was it that one's own mind played such hide-and-seek? What intricate labyrinths was the mind made up of! A simple woman born and brought up among cattle, Laachi had never imagined such intricacies. As she recalled her conversation with Bhoja her whole body cringed with shame. She tried to reason with herself that if she had not wanted to test her husband, she would never have extended such an invitation to this man. Yet, one of the biggest qualities of man is his ability to hide things from himself.

The two intervening days were the same for both Laachi and Bhoja but their thoughts were completely different.

Somehow, with great difficulty, the appointed evening arrived. When she asked her husband to accompany her to the barn, he said, 'What is this new thing you have come up with? You never needed me to go with you to the barn earlier.'

Laachi retorted, with some irritation, 'I did not know the ways of your village. Now I am scared to go all by myself.'

The Gujjar calmed her down, saying, 'Gradually, in a few days, the fear will go away. If you remain in control of your heart, there is nothing to fear. But I will come with you, if you so desire.'

And, in the barn, Bhoja's impatience was increasing by the minute. When he peeped over the wall, he saw the Gujjar accompanying Laachi. This was bad. He thought quickly and began to toss and turn the fodder.

The Gujjar could only see Bhoja's back and thus could

not recognize him. He roared, 'Who is it?'

Bhoja called out equally loudly, 'It's me, Bhoja.'

The Gujjar's eyes widened with surprise as he asked, 'Why are you in the barn at this hour? Bhoja, even the witches let at least one house be.'

Bhoja smiled and said, 'Let the witches mind their own business. Let's first deal with business; we can have the pleasantries later. Somebody complained to the Thakur that you are feeding the cows millet with the fodder. I find that it is true. You should have been more careful; now we're both in trouble.'

The Gujjar's heart sank. Yet he still trusted Bhoja to set things right so he said, 'I swear, Bhoja, it has happened only today. When I saw the pearl-like millet grains, I was tempted. Now my reputation is in your hands.'

Making sure that Laachi heard, Bhoja said ironically, 'True, our reputations are strung together, but what should I tell the Thakur. He's keeping a sharp eye on you nowadays, god knows why!'

Laachi looked at Bhoja and said, 'God may or may not know, but you do, certainly.'

The Gujjar flared up, 'Don't interfere! It is good that I came with you or else you would have quarrelled again. This is between us; we will settle this ourselves! Where is the need for women to meddle in the matters of men?'

Laachi knew very well what she needed. There was no point in this back and forth. But still, she had to admit, Bhoja was quick-witted. He had let no doubt creep in. While Laachi cleaned, the two men kept talking. Bhoja's assurance satisfied the Gujjar that the matter would go no further.

Next day, before daybreak, on her way to the pond, Laachi ran into Bhoja. He was on tenterhooks. He looked around and said, 'What past sin did you avenge on me? Why did you bring your husband with you?'

'He would not listen to me, what could I do? He doubts everything these days. If you hadn't been nimble-minded both

of us would have had our faces blackened.'

Bhoja said boastfully, 'That's just me. I can come up with such good excuses in the nick of time that no one can possibly ever doubt me. But now it is up to you to come up with a new rendezvous.'

Laachi whispered, 'I don't say "no", but what can I do about your bad luck? Come and meet me at the last hour of the night at the calves' barn.'

'Sure?'

'Yes, sure.'

After this assurance, Bhoja left. Laachi went her way, her hips swaying. This was a good game! She would play it till Bhoja finally tired of it. Her husband would finally be suspicious sometime. She had put her measuring rod in deep, unfathomed waters and she would be happy only when she had plumbed the depths.

In the evening, when Laachi put the oilcakes in front of a buffalo, she did not even turn to smell them. Maybe she was thirsty. She put about five pails of water for her, but the animal did not touch it. She patted the buffalo and untied her. The animal shot off, snorting. She was in heat. Laachi called out to the bull with all her might, hurrat, hurrat. It was as if the male was waiting for just this call. He went after the female buffalo like a shot from a cannon.

Nature is pure and knows no shame, hesitancy or the trappings of custom. But human beings are bound all around by walls, curtains, veils, clothes and cosmetics. Why should a woman bind herself to one man just because she is married to him? And such a man who, had she a choice, would not consent to even in her dreams. Laachi could have unveiled herself in front of any gujjar and been accepted. Why should her youth bear one man's subjugation? The thakur, the office bearers of estates and their agents—how many of these can a woman satisfy? Somehow, survival has become everybody's sole dharma. No morality is superior to the sustenance of family. For human beings, only this is the milk of history,

the yoghurt of knowledge and the butter of dharma. All else is disposable whey and water! Laachi had, till now, seen only the purity of white milk. Now the white was flecked with black. Human understanding changes with time and this was a strange conundrum. She could neither flee the situation halfway nor carry on. Was the sanctity of a married woman's honour to be so threatened by the thakur's terror? Millions of doubts whirled in her mind. She had a companion in her husband and a prosperous home. Why then did she seek this nebulous pleasure?

It was not yet morning when she shook her husband awake and said, 'You sleep like a log. I will not go out alone now at odd hours. Come along with me.' The Gujjar was not willing, but, in the end, had to accompany Laachi. It was a moonlit night and Bhoja had already been stationed at his post for sometime. He was gradually tiring of the wait when he saw two people approaching: Laachi and her husband. Bastard! Now he would have to cook up another quick scheme.

As Laachi entered, she saw a man picking dung. She asked loudly, 'Who is it?'

Bhoja turned and his forthright response was, 'It's me, Bhoja.'

Laachi feigned irritation and asked, 'What are you searching for here at this hour?'

Bhoja responded as he picked up the cow dung, 'Thakurani is fasting and I have come to pick up the dung of a heifer to purify the bed of the sacred basil.'

Gujjar said, 'You could have asked me, why worry yourself for a small chore like this?'

'What is so special about me that I cannot collect dung? And you know that the thakurani does not trust anyone but me.'

Laachi was pleased with Bhoja's answer. How clever!

After this, the friends got talking. Gujjar wanted to know if the thakur was angry. Bhoja said, with some pride, that

the possibility of that did not arise as long he was there. How could he forget the debts of such a dear friend, thought the Gujjar. Laachi inwardly deplored her husband's slowness of thought but said nothing.

When she sat down to churn yogurt early in the morning, she felt that her heart was churning with it.

Laachi, circumscribed by the boundaries of her house, finished all her chores automatically and on time. At midday, she took all the animals to the pond. Bhoja got his chance to come near. Laachi turned her face away. She couldn't tell why she felt such shame in front of these mute animals. She felt as if after today she would not be able to face them. Bhoja came around in front of her and said, 'Laachi, that's one more trip wasted.'

Laachi fiddled with her plait as she responded, 'What can I do? I have no cure for my husband's suspicion.'

'You do have a cure for my ailment though.'

'Not even god has any cure for your luck. Come to the barn after sunset. I will cure your ailment on a bed of grass,' she said.

Bhoja laughed and said, 'There is a lunar eclipse today. You will get merit worth seven generations. Now, don't forget!'

'How can I?'

There was no point hanging around after this. Bhoja wended his way back.

The thakur, on the other hand, was obsessed with only one thing. He had begun to recite Laachi's name instead of god's. In a fever of impatience, he would keep asking Bhoja, 'Has nothing worked out as yet?'

'It is coming through, master. It is easy to hunt partridges, but hunting a lion is difficult. At times one has to risk one's life. Your life is precious. Until I am confident how can I put you forward? I am still repenting the mistake I made earlier.'

The thakur was very pleased with his agent's loyalty.

Reaching much before time at the barn, Bhoja began

daydreaming. Here I touch Laachi's plait, these are the strings of her blouse, the breasts! Oh the lips! The lehenga and here . . . !

Suddenly he heard someone's footsteps on the grass. Laachi had arrived. He peeped out. Oh, the bastard had come again! It would be surprising if he did not suspect even now. Yet coining an excuse was child's play for Bhoja. He began collecting *kush* grass with care.

The Gujjar called from a distance, 'Who is it?'

Bhoja turned and responded as loudly, 'It's me, Bhoja.'

'What are you doing here?'

'Today is the eclipse of the moon. I am collecting kush. You know, in the palace, they need a whole bunch tonight.'

'Why did you worry about that? I have lots with me. You should have told me, I would have brought it.'

'You know how it is with me. I like to do things myself.'

Laachi laughed to herself. Bhoja's mind worked like a spinning wheel. And here was her idiot husband who could not see even the obvious. When four hours of the night had passed, the moon was completely eclipsed. With the moon darkened, the stars glowed brighter. The world knew about this eclipse, but no one knew the eclipse in Laachi's heart.

And when the moon freed itself from the eclipse, Laachi was bound in her husband's embrace.

However, Bhoja Kanwaria's bed too was not empty. He pined for Laachi, but in his view the woman immediately available was the most beautiful. What end would craving for Laachi serve? One cannot satisfy the body with mere fantasy. His lack of success with Laachi would drive Bhoja further mad with desire. And how could the Thakur's minion want for anything? Where he wanted one, he could get two. Bhoja was a realist. He would imagine any woman in his arms to be Laachi and satisfy himself with that duplicity. Even if man insists on breathing the same air all his life, he cannot.

Next day Laachi was washing clothes at a rock close to

the pond when she saw Bhoja approach. Before Bhoja could blame her, she ventured, 'Don't blame me! It is entirely your brother's fault. Find a reason to send him out so that your prayers can be answered.'

If Bhoja missed cues, how could he have remained the thakur's agent? He replied, 'Is it just my prayer, not yours?'

Teasing Bhoja, Laachi joked, 'My prayer is answered in my bedroom every night anyway.'

'Then why should you then worry about mine?'

'There is no need for me to worry about you. If you had been depending solely on me, I would have. You have many beloveds.'

'None of them can compare with you. Laachi, you must somehow manage a meeting for tonight.'

Without looking at him, she responded, 'Be at the sweet neem at the *akhri* after moonrise. It is deserted there. The rest depends on your luck.'

When Bhoja saw Laachi's mother-in-law coming, he got into the pond to drink water.

When even the sun, the moon and stars play hide-and-seek, why can't Laachi? Let the game continue as long as it could. She was in the second month of her pregnancy. While on this side of the world her young child will open its eyes, some soul somewhere will be closing its eyes. Nature too has been playing this game of hide-and-seek for aeons with its cycle of birth and death. One leaf falls away to give way to a new bud. This never-ending game has continued since time immemorial. The play of youth too is beyond compare. Youth blooms and withers everyday on this earth. Everyday newer characters enter—the play, though, remains the same.

Either the Gujjar had total faith in Laachi or he was too pure-hearted to suspect. It may also be that his selfishness with regard to his house had so blinded the Gujjar that he could see nothing else. And, in any case, how could one doubt the subordinates of the thakur?

By the time Laachi finished tending to the cattle, the

household chores and ate dinner, three hours of the night were over. She held the sleepy Gujar's hand and said, 'The carpenter's daughter has given me information that the cow herdsman trimmed our neem tree considerably. Even now somebody may be plucking the leaves. You don't care about anything. Let's go and set the matter right.'

The tree was a particular favourite of the Gujar. He had nourished it with his own hands. He had not been able to take care of the tree since Laachi's arrival. When reminded of it, he got up immediately. The akhri lay two fields away. Moonlight spread all over as the moon rose slowly. The green of the trees glowed in golden sheen.

The husband and wife opened the akhri's gate. Bhoja was finally satisfied that Laachi was true to her promise. Full of excitement, he was about to jump up when he heard a loud voice, 'Who is it?'

This damned Gujar follows Laachi everywhere like a shadow. Yet this was not the time to think of such things. He instantly cooked up an excuse and started plucking the leaves of the tree and throwing them to the ground. The Gujar called out in a sterner voice, 'Who is damaging the tree? Speak up!'

Breaking the twigs, Bhoja said, 'It's me, Bhoja.'

Intimating her presence, Laachi said, 'Are you guarding the tree in the middle of the night?'

Bhoja replied without hesitation, 'Thakurani's eyes are aching. That is why I had to come for these leaves. But why are the two of you here in the akhri at this odd hour?'

Bhoja climbed down after he was through. The Gujar said to him, 'The carpenter's daughter had told us that the cow herders have been cutting the leaves. How could I rest?'

Bhoja sighed deeply, 'You had to bother for nothing.'

The Gujar said, 'At least it has given us an occasion to meet you.'

Bhoja kept looking at the Gujar and aimed his reply at Laachi, 'What meaning does such a meeting have?'

Yet these circumstances were beyond Laachi's control. House, home, society, caste, duty, ritual, the preservation of a good name and customs and traditions, there were many hurdles and problems to overcome. How could a single woman fight such a veritable whirlpool of barriers? The untrammelled freedom of animals is but a dream! Questions and thoughts such as these burnt in Laachi's heart. Which path should she choose? Which path was right for her?

When they were making love that night she felt as if she was suffocating in the coils of some terrible python. Would woman ever be free from this grip? The reek of this aspect of married life made her head split. Her lawfully wedded husband had rebuked her for the well-deserved blow she gave the thakur! Which shelter could she turn to? And even if she yearned for such support, would she ever get it?

Her sleep, which had entangled itself in her many dreams, caused her to wake a little later than usual. As soon as she got out of bed, she felt as if the sun had not risen at its fixed place. So what if it had not! She had no time to pay it any mind. Household chores left her little time to even breathe. She hurried out of her bedroom. The cattle had to be looked after, milked, fed and cleaned and all other work finished. Work ends only when it is done.

The sun had touched midday overhead by the time she could go to the pasture. It was late and her husband must be waiting. She quickened her steps. The tinkle of her bangles, the swirling of her lehanga, the rustle of her chunari, and the jingle from her ankle bells diffused magic in the air. The sunbeams drank the wine of Laachi's beauty and felt blessed.

As soon as she had exited the village, she ran into Bhoja. When she did not slow down, he began walking with her saying, 'Laachi, it seems we will meet only in the funeral ground.'

'If you don't die how can you be lucky enough for even that?' she said.

'But death is the one thing I have control over.'

'Not for me though.'

'What do you have control over, then?'

'I cannot answer that. I tried hard, and if things could not be managed who am I to blame? If you pursue me too much then people will talk. When the night is a quarter gone, meet me in the kitchen. The honour of the home will thus remain at home.'

Bhoja agreed, 'I think this is better. Let things rest on my luck.'

Leaving things to fate, he returned to the village while Laachi carried on. Her husband must be waiting for food.

The Gujar was playing his algoja, sitting under the khejari tree. The cattle were grazing all around him. When Laachi arrived he asked, 'Why are you late?'

Unloading the basket of food, Laachi said, 'If you don't let me sleep on time how will I get up early?'

When the Gujar saw the amount of food she had brought, he asked Laachi, 'Why have you brought so much of food?'

'I couldn't eat because I was late. You finish yours and then I will eat.'

'Why after, we will eat together.'

The Gujar never wanted for anything. There was thick yoghurt, butter, vegetables, sweet lapsi and bajra bread for lunch. They ate together, and then the Gujar instructed, 'I'm going to take a nap. You take care that the animals don't get into anyone else's fields.'

As he dozed off, Laachi walked towards the animals. She caressed the pregnant cow and buffalo and took a few steps forward when she saw something shiny and black in a Karil bush. As she drew closer she saw that it was a cobra shedding its skin. Even when she shooed it, it did not raise its hood. The slough was shadowing its eyes. It moved just a little and then lay inert. The slough did not let it move faster.

Laachi threw a few pebbles at it. As the snake moved further, its slough caught on a thorn. The snake slithered, strained a little and the slough began to come off. Soon

enough, the snake got rid of the slough and disappeared swiftly into the thick bush. Laachi immediately picked it up and looked at it with wonder. It was a white, smooth piece of skin with innumerable little spors. When the slough held it tight, the cobra had not been able to move. It had lain there inert and blind like a rope. As it got free from the slough, it disappeared like a vision. So, the slough was the bond!

After that Laachi began to see the sloughs of snakes all around her.

She wandered for a while and when she came back to the khejari, she found her husband snoring. One by one, she looked at the husband and the slough. Sometimes the slough looked like the husband and at other times, the husband resembled the slough. How had her perspective changed? An endless turmoil was going on in her heart.

After a while when the husband woke up, he saw the slough hanging around Laachi's neck. He asked with amazement, 'Where did you get it? It is a good omen and will fulfil your desire.'

Laachi did not respond. She simply stared at the empty skin.

Her husband came closer, embraced her, kissed her twice on the cheeks and said, 'There is no need to ask even the astrologer. You will have a son as handsome as the moon. He will be very lucky. A slough's omen is always good. I had found a slough three days before I got engaged to you.'

Laachi made a wry face as she pointed out, 'The omen did not prove happy after all.'

The Gujar turned and twisted Laachi's bangle and exclaimed, 'Why? How has it been bad? Could I have been luckier than finding a wife like you?' He gazed into her eyes as he added, 'And I can fulfil at least one desire of yours right away.'

As his lips touched hers, she understood what he meant. She protested, 'You must be mad. Certain things should only be done in the bedroom.'

'There is no one to see us here.'

'What of the acacia tree, the karil bush, the grass and the birds?' With this she ran towards the village. She didn't turn and stop though he kept calling.

She went straight to her room, opened the trunk, carefully put the slough in it and locked it. She could not be idle. There was no end to the work in a Gujjar household. She kept thinking what would happen when her husband found Bhoja in the kitchen. He would surely suspect something and with that suspicion would come anger. Bhoja was doomed today, she thought.

But Laachi was in for a disappointment. Close to midnight she woke up her husband and said, 'There is someone hiding in the kitchen.'

Gujjar was quick to react. He picked up his staff and proceeded to the kitchen with Laachi. As he lit up the lamp, there was indeed a man crouching behind the grain pot. He brandished his staff and challenged the intruder, 'Be ready to die, whoever you are!'

Once again, Bhoja immediately improvised. He came forward fearlessly and said, 'Death has come, but for you. Somebody had complained to the master that your wife is cooking porridge from new millet everyday. When the master enquired further, I had to come here to find the truth. Good man, your wife is openly cooking bread using the new millet that even the master has not yet tasted.'

He extended the bread and added, 'You will jeopardize your reputation as well as my own. Now these have to be shown to the Thakur.'

The Gujjar folded his hands and began pleading, 'I will die before my time if you do that. So far I have lived a life granted by god but after today, the life I live will be granted by you. Please sort this out somehow. I will not repeat the mistake. You know well, I cannot eat at all if I don't have bajra.'

Bhoja had to relent. After this, Laachi could not stay there

for a moment. She ran to her room and fell on the bed. Such a cowardly husband would be hard to find even if she looked for one with a lamp. Yet she admired Bhoja's intelligence. What an excuse! If ever a man had brains, it was him!

The Gujjar saw Bhoja off till the end of the lane and came to his room. In a Gujjar household butter is cheaper than oil. A lamp burning cow butter dimly lit the room. The Gujjar's shadow spread across half the bedroom. He kept singing Bhoja's praises for some time. Then he took off his pugree and began to caress his wife's cheeks, saying, 'You ran away from the pasture during the day, where will you go now? I am going to settle all my scores today.'

She had been married to this man after seven rounds around the sacred fire. How could she refuse him in spite of the storm raging in her heart? If she had not been married to him she might have made some excuse and expressed her unwillingness. Laachi had no such escape. What could be worse than feigning an excuse with such turbulence in her mind!

A cool breeze wafted into the bedroom as her blouse was undone. Lightning crashed and dark clouds began rumbling. The last of the rainy season began to scatter raindrop pearls all around. There was no sign of rain during the day. By sundown the humidity became so high that clouds from far off accumulated and it began to pour. God alone knows his ways. And so only Laachi knew the ways of her heart.

Next day, she again woke up late. Descending from the bedroom she immediately went to the storeroom. There was water all over as it had rained all night. She opened the box and took out the slough of the cobra and stared at it for a long time. She started when the mother-in-law called her. After that she was lost in every day chores of the household.

At dusk Laachi was returning home with vegetables when she met Bhoja. Expressing anger, he said, 'Last night I had to stay hungry even in the kitchen.'

'What could I do? Your friend spoiled the whole plan.'

'There seems to be no end to this,' said Bhoja.

'Be patient. The dice will fall right sometime. Your manipulations will not go waste. Your friend sleeps like a log past midnight. I will be sleeping in the courtyard in an orange shawl and the Gujar will be in the white shawl. Just tug the shawl and I will come with you. Does that satisfy you?'

'Satisfaction will come when it has to, but I am ready to die at your bidding.'

Laachi reminded him 'Remember that mine will be the orange shawl. Let's see how clever you are.'

Bhoja added proudly, 'There is no limit to my cleverness. It is you who has made me so helpless.'

'Go now or else people will talk,' said Laachi.

Bhoja turned the other way and Laachi came back home and got busy milking the cows.

At night, after dinner when Gujar began climbing the steps to the bedchamber, Laachi reminded him, 'Your brother-in-law is sleeping there. You really don't know anything!'

Climbing down the steps, he asked, 'Where will we sleep?'

'Speak softly. You think of nothing but sleep the whole day. I am the victim of your obsession. Nothing will be lost if you sleep in the barn just for a day.'

Putting rennet in the milk for yoghurt, Laachi said, 'There is a cot in the courtyard. Go and lie down. I will follow you soon.'

'Bring something to cover ourselves with. It gets chilly after midnight.'

And then it was the same night, the same darkness and that very Laachi and that very Gujar.

He fell asleep, but sleep eluded Laachi. Her husband's desire to please Bhoja was so strong that not even a shadow of a doubt touched him. Can self-interest be that dumb and so blind? Where even a dumb piece of rock would have suspected, her husband did not suspect anything. Like the pure glow of a precious pearl, she had preserved her youth;

was it only for this? Her husband did not value it at all. Why, then, had the marriage been organized with so much pomp, show and noise? Why did they bring an unwitting girl into a new household? Was it to propagate progeny and satisfy bodily lust? Or was it only to slog like a bull yoked to a mill all day long in the household? Was it to lick the feet of the thakur and his subordinates? If only her husband's strength had backed up the blow of her elbow, how happy she would have been! Her husband had no objection to anything that served his self-interest. What nectar would he obtain from the poisoned tree of selfishness? What was the use of paying attendance to only one man, the husband?

Such venomous thoughts hissed from the snake hole in Laachi's heart. Next to her, the husband was sleeping like a lazy python, snoring loudly. Today was the final test for her husband and Bhoja. She waited to see what would happen.

For Bhoja, even a minute's wait was becoming intolerable. He arrived at Gujar's yard stealthily an hour earlier than the scheduled time. He looked around carefully. He could see that Laachi had been right. Today would be the day of fulfillment. After this, without a thought, he tugged hard at the orange shawl. The Gujar jumped and shouted, 'Who is it?'

Quick came the reply, 'It's me, Bhoja.'

'Bhoja?' the Gujar was amazed.

Bhoja came closer and whispered, 'Tell me, do you wish to accompany us on a pilgrimage to Dwarkaji?'

'No, I don't.'

'I had come quietly just to ask you. If you don't wish to go at least do not shout, you will make the trip inauspicious by doing so and scare my companions. Go back to sleep.'

Thus instructing the Gujar, Bhoja went back. Laachi was lying awake wrapped in a white shawl next to her husband. She heard the entire exchange and no doubt was left in her mind now. A flame brighter than the sun leapt in front of her eyes and with this all the sanctions, traditions and values

turned to ashes. She was, perhaps, awaiting just such a fire.

The one who had taken her hand had taken no risk other than seven rounds around a sacred fire. Yet, Bhoja had taken endless risks for her. How could one deny such longing? And what was the value of such a youth? To slave away just for food and clothes? Or to have her body brutalized? Was it all that life was worth? If this was so, then why should woman answer to just one master? Her freedom lay in shedding the slough of conjugal fidelity.

Next day when she was taking the cattle out to graze, the Gujjar observed, 'It is very humid even early this morning. It will rain for sure. Come back soon.'

Laachi did not bother to answer.

She did not encounter Bhoja when going to the pasture or returning home. Bhoja was disheartened. Laachi was not the only woman who could slake his thirst. Every woman had a different place and a different taste in bed.

The same old pain rankled in thakur's heart. He would keep asking the same question—Bhoja, has anything happened yet?

Finally, in utter disgust, Bhoja said, 'That whore of a woman is the devil incarnate. She can be set right only when her nose and ears are chopped off.'

Sighing heavily, the master of the village reminded Bhoja, 'I had told you this earlier.'

Bhoja agreed, saying, 'I ask a hundred pardons for that, master. It was a blunder.'

By dusk the sky was overcast with dark clouds. Lightning streaked all over. The ebony-hued roaring clouds vied with each other, as if thousands of elephants were trumpeting all at once. Laachi's heart too was overcast with clouds as she tethered the cattle in their respective places. Her husband could predict the rain, but he could not see the obvious overtures of Bhoja. What kind of judgment was this?

The Gujjar expended his lust on his lawfully wedded wife and then fell asleep. As Laachi came to the bedroom door,

her youthful bloom was anointed with showers of rains and the reverberations of clouds. They blessed her exquisite beauty. The slough of the cobra was slung on Laachi's neck like a garland.

There was no time to think any further. One by one she took off all her clothes and ornaments and began climbing down the steps of the bedroom. It was raining in torrents and lightning seemed to split the sky. Laachi still had the slough around her neck. Her abundant hair trailed down her thighs, looking as if a dark cloud followed her.

Lightning found a new meaning to its existence by looking at her beauty. The torrential rain purified itself by touching the naked beauty. She nurtured hope in her womb and the slough around her neck. What greater assurance could there be?

Drenched in the soothing rains, Laachi knew no fear. She went straight to Bhoja's house. She was about to rattle the latch when she heard the subdued voice of a woman, 'You were crazy about Laachi, how is it that you remembered me today?'

'Let Laachi and her pride go to hell. Don't even mention the whore's name to me.'

The searing glare of the lightning wiped away the pure smile on Laachi's lips. She walked on in the pouring rain. She did not stop at any door nor did she seek help from any man.

With eternal hope in her womb, she still roams the universe, naked. She has no destination and knows no rest. And when the extant sun and moon disintegrate, her womb might bear fruit.

the dilemma

There was once a wealthy seth who was returning home with his son's marriage party after the wedding celebrations. They all stopped on the way to rest in the cool shadow of an old khejari tree. Near the khejari was a pond full of rippling water covered with lotus flowers. At that hour of the afternoon the sun's rays came down mercilessly and the hot wind of the month of Jeth blew in the jungle. The marriage party decided to take a break for food. The bride and her five maids spread out a rug under the khejari tree and sat down. There was a large babul tree close by loaded with lovely yellow flowers and ripe green beans. The rest of the people sat in the shadow of this tree and lunch began.

Turning her back to the others, the bride removed her veil. She looked upwards and saw the long beans growing on the tree. The sight cooled her eyes. It so happened that a ghost lived on the khejari. The beauty of the bride and the fragrance emanating from her enchanted him. It seemed like the essence, tenderness and scent of roses had been transformed into the form of a woman. It was hard to believe the evidence of one's eyes. It was as if lightning itself had forsaken its home in the clouds and come to earth. No simile was befitting for those intoxicating eyes. The ghost had seen umpteen women but this beautiful face had no parallel. The very shadow of the khejari seemed radiant with her presence, as if nature had distilled and poured all its beauty in her.

The ghost felt blessed and thought of inhabiting her body,

but soon enough he came to his senses. He could not possibly inhabit her body and cause her pain. How could he torture such a beauty? The ghost was now in a quandary. The bride would soon be gone. What then? Though he did not wish to possess and torment her, yet he could not let her go. He had never found himself in such a predicament. Should he then possess the body of the groom? That too would hurt the bride. If such a beauty was sad surely the clouds would stop raining, lightning would not shine and the sun and the moon would not rise. The cycle of nature itself would be ruined. His heart had never felt such compassion before. He would rather torment himself than cause any pain to the beautiful bride. The experience of such self-inflicted pain would make his life worthwhile.

Finally, rested, the party was ready to carry on with their journey. When the bride got up to walk away, darkness fell before the ghost's eyes. What shadow was this that blocked eyes which could see clearly even in the night? What blot was this on the face of the midday sun?

With tinkling steps the bride climbed the bullock-cart of the groom. How fortunate and happy the groom was! Every pore in the ghost's body ached as if thorns were piercing it. His heart burnt like a live furnace. The parting made it impossible for him to live or to die. How would he bear the burning pain? Never before had he faced such a dilemma. As the bullock-cart was lost to sight, the ghost lost consciousness.

The bridegroom, sitting in the bullock-cart, was no less puzzled. For two hours, he had not been able to tally the expenses incurred on his wedding. Father would be furious over such a lapse, he thought. They had spent far too much. For the groom, real happiness lay in calculation and business—the rest was useless. After all, god himself is such a sharp calculator—he keeps track of every human breath, every drop of rain, every particle of air. Every grain of earth is registered in god's book. When nature itself cannot err in keeping account of everything, how can a mere seth overlook an error

in his books!

The bridegroom was immersed in his account books. The bride peeped through the curtain of the bullock-cart. The sunlight was so scorching that one could hardly open one's eyes. Red *dhalus* were aglow on green shrubs. How lovely! How enticing! The bride could not take her eyes off the inviting fruit. She clutched the groom's arm like an innocent child and said, 'Just once, leave that ledger book and look outside. See, how beautiful the dhalus are! Please, bring me a handful. See, even in such a scorching heat, their beauty does not dry up. As the sun goes higher, their colour brightens. They look redder in the sun. Any other colour would evaporate or fade.'

The bridegroom was an average human being, neither handsome nor ugly. Though married in the prime of youth, he was not overjoyed with the idea of matrimony. Whether five years later or now, getting married made no difference to him, it had to happen some day. An important job was completed. He touched the *naulakha* necklace his bride was wearing, and said, 'Only poor villagers eat dhalus. Why do you want them? If you wish to eat, I will take out dates and coconuts from the bag. Eat them to your heart's content.'

But the bride turned out to be less sophisticated. She insisted, 'No, please bring the dhalus for me. If you don't want to bother, let me pluck them myself.'

The bridegroom stuck to his opinion, 'Who wants to get entangled in those thorns? Only uncivilized people eat dhalus. Eat waterlily seeds or sugar candy. Don't ever mention the dhalus at home or else everyone will laugh at you.'

'Let them laugh,' said the bride and jumped out of the bullock-cart. She flitted like a butterfly from one shrub to another. Soon she was back with her *chunari* full of bright, red dhalus. She washed the fruit with water from the water pot and cooled them. The red colour of the dhalus vied with her red lips, but the bridegroom liked neither the red colour of dhalus nor that of his bride's lips. He remained occupied

with the ledger and though the bride tried to cajole him, he did not eat the fruit.

The bride said, 'Suit yourself. As for me I would rather hang the necklace on the bush in exchange for the dhalus.'

The bridegroom watched his young wife as she ate the wild fruit and said, 'Don't you dare say such a stupid thing again. Father would be very angry. He values virtue more than beauty in a woman.'

The bride smiled, 'Oh, I see now! You are busy with the calculations out of fear of your father. Yet everything has a right time and is it justified to be busy with accounts on the day of your own marriage?'

'The marriage had to happen and it is done for now. I have to straighten out all the accounts and start my journey to far off lands on Teej festival for business. There will not be a more auspicious day to begin the journey for the next seven years,' he said.

The rustic girl could not appreciate the good news or the value of the auspicious day. The dhalus lost their taste with the news and her crushed heart seemed to bleed. At first she couldn't believe it. She asked, 'What did you say? Will you be leaving for distant lands on business? I had heard that your mansion has lots of wealth.'

'Yes. You will see for yourself,' announced the groom pompously. 'The attics are brimming with precious stones. But money has to multiply day and night. Seths have only one religion and that is to make money. One can't miss an opportune day to start the journey,' he said.

The newly wedded bride fell silent. There was no point in talking. One by one she threw away all the dhalus. The groom smiled and said, 'I told you earlier, only poor villagers eat this fruit. We rich people can't eat these. Finally you too couldn't eat them, and had to throw them. Besides you also got sunburnt in the process.'

Having said this, he peeped out of the bullock-cart to gauge the intensity of the sun. It was scorching, so hot that

the very eyes would burn. The innumerable hingania bushes with their yellow flowers seemed to him to be leaping flames. The bridegroom quipped sarcastically, 'I hope you won't run after these now. If they were worth anything, the shepherds wouldn't have spared them.'

The bride sat still with her head bowed. It was for this husband that she had left her home and parents, she thought. She remembered all her playmates, relatives, the bank of the village pond, the game of hide-and-seek and all the revelry that she had forsaken to come away with him. Deserting the loving care of her mother, she had hoped to gain love from her new home and here was her husband ready to leave for business on the auspicious day of the Teej festival. What use was the countless money they had? They didn't enjoy it in their lifetimes. When you die, you cannot buy even a coffin with it. Why had she come away with him, for which pleasure, for which unexperienced happiness and contentment?

The bridegroom did his calculations, the bride thought her thoughts and the bullocks meandered along. Finally, the marriage party arrived at the seth's mansion and the bride was taken into the women's quarters accompanied by songs and the beating of drums. Whosoever saw her, praised her beauty and marvelled at her flawless complexion.

Butter-lamps were lit in the bedchamber that night. A quarter of the night had gone by when the bridegroom came into the room. As soon as he entered, he started giving his wife advice. She must always be mindful of the reputation of the family and serve her in-laws well. One's good name is always in one's hands. And, why awaken desire for just two days when they must live apart for five years. Desire that would torment them for the time they would not be together. Time flies and so would these five years. Then it was the same old bedchamber, the same lamp and the same marriage bed. She mustn't worry about anything at all; five years would go by in the blink of an eye.

The bride heard the valuable advice quietly. What else

could she do or say anyway? Whatever her lord, the husband, wished, was also her wish. Whatever the father wished, was the son's wish. Whatever Laxmi, the goddess of wealth, wished was the father's wish. And whatever greed wished was Laxmi's wish. The first night was spent giving and taking advice and with the night vanished millions of twinkling stars.

Under the khejari, the ghost regained consciousness. He looked all around at the deserted jungle. The old khejari tree loaded with beans cast a cool shadow under it. Where was the bride with the intoxicating eyes? Where was the beautiful face with the rosy lips? Had it all been a dream? His inner self seemed to have been cleansed of all deceit, and purity now abounded in him. Soon, the sun rose like never before. The world was bathed in light as the breeze blew gently. His heart changed into myriad forms and then became one with creation.

And the sun had never set like this before. It spread red gulal all over the skies as it sank. There was no bright light, and no pitch darkness. There was no moon in the sky, no sun and no stars either. It was as if nature had put on a translucent veil. One could see the veil as well as the face. Suddenly, nature changed its chunari—a darker one with countless stars embedded in it—and the night's face was visible as though through a mist. Nature never looked so enchanting—it all appeared to be the magic of the bride's beauty.

In the meanwhile, the husband had turned his face away from the bride's charms and was on his way. His waistband was full of precious stones and a bag was flung on his shoulders. The potential of making immense wealth shone bright like the sun in the firmament of business. There seemed to be unlimited possibilities of making profit, and happiness would naturally follow.

He passed by the same khejari and the ghost recognized him instantly. He turned into a man and greeting the husband, asked, 'Where are you off to, brother, when the sacred threads of wedding on your wrist have not even been undone?'

The seth's son said, 'Can't the auspicious threads be undone away from home?'

The ghost walked with the husband for a distance. He soon gathered that the husband was going to be out on business for five years. If that auspicious day had not sealed the marriage then there would be no possibility of it for the next seven years. The ghost closely observed the mannerisms of the seth's son, then he turned and took another path. He began thinking that if he could take the husband's form and reach his mansion, nobody would ask him any questions for the coming five years! What a wonderful coincidence had come his way! We will face things as they come, he thought. God had finally granted him his wish. He instantly transformed himself into an image of the seth's son and set out toward his village. His joy knew no bounds as he came closer to his destination.

Daylight had still not faded, though it had become quite dark. A black-and-yellow storm began to rage in the north. Slowly, the storm rose higher and it began to get more and more dark in spite of the sun. Dust from the earth rose to the skies. Nature began to protest under the onslaught of a wind that threatened to shake even the roots of mountains! The tall trees with their hollow roots uprooted with menacing cracks. Supple vines swayed from one side to another but no harm came to them. The soft grass that was always trampled upon under everybody's feet remained intact. The storm blew over it. The entire jungle swung in the cradle of the wind. The nests of the bigger birds were scattered and the small birds clung to the branches. It was impossible to fly as the wind reigned supreme. The jungle seemed to be groaning and dust that blew with the wind had blotted the sun's brilliance. Strange was the dance of whirlwind! Strange the dance of dust! The dust storm engulfed everything all around. No mountains, no plants, no earth, nothing was visible. Human knowledge, its endeavours and its accomplishments—all seemed trivial in the face of this upheaval of nature.

Soon a different picture of nature emerged—light began to gradually filter through the dust and things became visible. As nature's face cleared, the mountains stood where they were and the sun glowed like a gold plate. The trees were where they were and so were the shrubs. What peculiar magic was this? Suddenly big drops of rain fell. It seemed the clouds had opened their mouth and creation itself was bathing in the downpour. Streams and rivulets were swollen with water and soon the land and the water mass became one. There was nothing but water all around.

What change in such a short time, the ghost thought. One had witnessed it, yet it seemed unbelievable! What was it? How did it happen? Was the storm in his heart expressing itself outside? With this idea in his mind, the ghost began to walk faster and as he walked he made several plans.

He went to the seth's shop first rather than going to the mansion. Busy with his accounts, the seth saw his son, but did not believe his eyes. How could his son be back so soon? The boy had never disobeyed him. He thought that marriage had made his son useless and this was the end of their moneymaking. He blamed the boy's mother for allowing him to choose a wife over his business.

The son understood the father's feelings before he could utter a word. With folded hands he said, 'Listen to me first, father. I have come back to consult you about business. If you order me, I will go back without going home. On my way I met a holy man meditating. His whole body was covered with layers of termites. I cleared the insects, drew water from the well and gave him a bath. I then made him drink water and eat food. He was so happy with me that he granted me a boon whereby every morning as I get out of bed I will get five gold coins. The blessing will hold only if I stay at home. Now whatever you order, I will obey.'

Such an unexpected gift could not be ignored. The seth happily agreed and so did his wife. Besides earning money by staying at home, their only son would never be out of her

sight now. The bride was surprised and happy, and filled with pride, thinking that no one could have resisted beauty like hers.

The husband came to the bedroom at night after working on the accounts of the shop and having had dinner. Lamps burnt in four corners and the bed was covered with flowers. There was so much excitement in anticipation. The tinkling of approaching steps could be heard and there was no sound better than this. When the bejewelled bride entered the room, her beauty had no parallel. The bedchamber was enveloped in the invigorating fragrance of attar. This was the fragrance that had awakened his heart under the khejari tree. Now their eyes met and even in his dreams, he had not expected that what he desired would happen so soon.

The bride came and sat beside him without any reservations. As she removed her veil, it was as if all the joys of the three worlds were there for him to experience. The bride smiled and said, 'I knew you would turn halfway and come back. Such a star-studded night does not allow one to go. Why did you leave against my wishes? My prayers have been fulfilled with your return.'

His heart was in a state of turmoil on hearing these words. How could he soil her purity? It would be an unpardonable sin to deceive her. She was happy because she took him to be her real husband! And he was offering her a life of falsehood. How could he cheat such an innocent love? Love should clean even the hearts of ghosts. One can try deception or use muscle power against an equal enemy, but killing a person while he is asleep is an insult to chivalry.

Pulling himself away, the ghost said, 'God alone knows whether your prayer has been fulfilled or not. Look carefully and make sure that I am not somebody else. Some conjurer might have taken your husband's form and come here in his place!'

The bride was a little taken aback. She looked hard at the man sitting next to her, studying him from head to foot. He

had the same face, the same colouring and the very same voice. She understood instantly that her husband was testing her virtue. She gave a luminous smile and said, 'Not even in my dreams would I let the shadow of another man touch me. The power of my virtue will burn any man other than my husband.'

The ghost was struck by the statement. The thought that she was not virtuous flashed in his mind, but he swallowed his words. If he had been burnt, her virtue would have been proven. But as he was indeed the other man and he did not burn, it proved that her virtue had no strength. The very next moment he remembered his own love and his anger subsided. He was happy once again. What is there in a face, he thought! Had her husband been true to her he wouldn't have ignored her charms for the sake of money. Did he hold her hand to forsake her and let her burn in the fire of separation? How could a husband with eyes worth the name be blind to her beauty, when not even a blind man could resist it? Though he took seven laps around the sacred fire in the marriage ceremony, his love for her was not true. He thought, even though I'm a ghost, I truly love her. My heart aches at the thought of cheating her and hiding facts would be an insult to love itself. He couldn't breathe easy without telling her the truth. He inched closer to her, saying, 'Though I am a different man, your virtue is true because my love for you is genuine. Your real husband is not honest in his love. How else could he turn his face from such beauty and go so far away.'

How could the poor bride judge the difference between truth and falsehood? She couldn't understand a thing. When the parents themselves thought him to be their son and he looked exactly the same, how could she tell? After all, most relationships are based on people's appearance.

The ghost then narrated everything to her truthfully. How he lost consciousness after she left and then how he came to his senses. How he talked to her husband on his journey,

how he made up his mind to take the husband's form and decided to come here. He even told her about the storm and the rain he faced on way. Stunned, the bride sat very still. Had god given her ears to listen to this?

Gently caressing her hand, the ghost further said, 'The parents are only concerned with getting five gold coins every day. They are not bothered with the truth. Had I hidden it from you I would have dishonoured love. If I had not disclosed it, you would not have even dreamt of the truth for a full five years. You would have consorted with me taking me to be your real husband. Yet my heart didn't allow me to do so. I have earlier been with many women and have even harassed them. What I am experiencing now is very new to me. God alone knows where such compassion and love have come from! But if you are unwilling, I'll go away this very moment and will not bother you till I live. I don't want the joys of love if it's torture to you. I would still remain indebted to you all my life for having transformed the venom in my heart into nectar. This is the highest dignity a woman's beauty and a man's love can acquire.'

The bride answered, 'I don't know if it is better not to know or is it better now that I know the reality. I really don't know.'

The ghost locked his eyes on hers and said, 'Would a barren woman know the pain of labour! Facing the truth is like withstanding birth pangs. There was neither pain nor happiness in hiding the truth from you. Our relationship would have been only a semblance of the truth. The enjoyment would have been fake. I know the truth, because I have possessed the bodies of many women as a ghost. I know more than god himself how much virtue there is in those women who visualize their lover's face while making love with their husbands. Outwardly they show that the touch of even the shadow of a man other than their husband is taboo. The only fear is that of exposure. If there were no fear of exposure, even god would not miss a chance to commit a sin. Now, tell

me, what you want. In spite of being a ghost, I haven't hidden anything from you.'

No woman had ever been faced with such a dilemma before. Should she accept a lover willingly, she wondered. Who would not commit adultery if there were no fear of detection? The bride was tongue-tied; as if she had forgotten to speak.

An unfamiliar wave surged in the bride's heart. She thought, when she was born, not a copper plate, but a winnowing basket was beaten to announce her birth. Her parents didn't celebrate her birth as they would have been happier if a son had been born. Just like a heap of dirt piles up rapidly so does a girl grow quickly. It seemed that neither the courtyard nor the sky could contain her. She had just entered the tenth year when her parents had begun worrying about her marriage. Buttermilk or a girl's hand can be had for the asking by anybody. As talk of her beauty spread far and wide proposals poured in. It became difficult to complete even sixteen years. Her mother's womb could keep her safe but the parental courtyard could not. Then came the proposal from this family. She was lucky that her parents accepted this proposal. Had it been an ordinary home and not a mansion, she would still have had to go. Whatever the parents decide has to be accepted. And now her husband was engrossed in business. He couldn't tell the difference between a woman's face and a pot's bottom. The bloom of youth was lost on him. He didn't understand her in the bullock-cart or in the bedchamber and had just walked away from her bed without looking back.

Today, in comparison to the glow of the ghost's love, even the sun had faded. She could do nothing when the one who had held her hand in marriage had deserted her. How could she resist the love expressed by the ghost? She could not hold back the one who deserted the bedchamber and now could not she resist the one who was entering it. How could she ignore the love he had for her? Just as she couldn't

control her dreams, she couldn't resist love. She lost conscious thought and welcomed the ghost.

Was it the ghost in the bride's own heart that had manifested itself? If so, why feel shy? Silence becomes eloquent when words fail. They understood each other's inner urges. The lamps faded slowly and taking the place of light, darkness began to glow. The withered buds of the conjugal bed bloomed once again. Both light and darkness in the bedchamber acquired new meaning even as the radiance of the million stars above increased many folds.

When nights are so precious, time flies swiftly. The seth's business thrived and their reputation spread far and wide. Everyone was happy with the young man. He helped people in times of need and treated all women with respect and deference. He was restrained and firm in business dealings and virtuous in character. However, when letters from the son living abroad arrived, he simply tore them up.

Three years of sheer bliss passed like a sweet dream. The ghost was involved in the life at the mansion and the husband and wife led a happy married life waiting all day for their time together at night.

The wife was now in her third month of pregnancy. When the father-in-law heard the good news, he doled out a mound of molasses to everyone. People felt that since this was his first unselfish act, he might change further in the coming days. The parents-to-be also quietly gave alms to the poor.

They both wanted a daughter and their dreams also grew along with the child in the womb. The days rushed by and the wife was soon in her ninth month, sleeping through most of the daylight hours, attended continuously by three maids.

One night, the wife sleeping with her head on her husband's lap, raised her face and said, 'Sometimes I wonder how I would have spent these four years had we not stopped under the khejari tree to rest that day.'

The ghost said. 'You could have gone through your life somehow, but imagine, what would have become of me. I

would have been living a ghostly life haunting this shrub or that tree. What good sense prevailed in me that I didn't take possession of your body! I still can't believe that I am living such a blissful life.' The night slipped by as he ran his fingers through her hair.

Far away, the husband woke up early in the morning, yawned, and drank cold water from the pitcher. He looked around him. It was still dark and the stars twinkled all over the sky. He began to think that a shorter night would have been better. Half of one's life is spent sleeping. One cannot do business when asleep. Nonetheless, he had accumulated a lot of wealth and his father would be very happy.

Now and then he would meet businessmen from around his hometown and they would be surprised to see him there. They often asked when he had arrived from his village and if he knew that his wife was to shortly deliver a child.

He assumed that they were jealous of his success or were joking with him since he couldn't possibly be in his village and here simultaneously. As for his wife he answered that his parents had not replied to any of his letters or told him anything at all.

The neighbour said, 'Just think, why would they send a message? Who would they send a message to? Their son had returned from his journey on the third day. Because of a saint's blessing he gives five gold coins everyday to his father. There is celebration and festivity all around. Butter-oil lamps burn in the bedchamber. Oh, I see, you look exactly like the seth's son! Even the seth wouldn't know the difference. Now that I have seen you, I know that you are a look-alike and not the same man.'

'How could I be the other man? I think I'll have to go home in a day or two.'

So he wound up his business and giving instructions to the accountant, set out for the village. It was the hot month of Jeth and a storm raged. When he saw the red dhalus on the karil shrubs, he remembered the moments with his wife.

If she likes these so much, why don't I take her some, he thought, they don't cost anything. He plucked the dhalus and tied them up in a cloth.

When he reached his mansion, he saw a group of women there. The seth and his wife were offering prayers. The ghost-husband was standing outside the bedchamber, looking rather nervous. The wife was in pain as it was a difficult delivery and the midwives were busy.

Amidst this turmoil, the real husband walked into the courtyard without any hesitation and stood there covered with dust and grime, with the bundle of dhalus dangling from his shoulder. He touched his parents' feet who were obviously dumbfounded. What was this? This man looked exactly like their son! Could he be a swindler or a cheat? And who was their real son?

When the husband heard the moans of his wife in labour, he understood everything in a flash. So, what he had heard was true! He couldn't imagine who had cheated him but he felt his blood boil with anger. Meanwhile, the lover-ghost had ears only for the painful moans of his beloved. He wasn't conscious of anything else around him!

The son said to his father, 'I was abroad for four years. How has my wife conceived?

The father answered, 'Who are you? My son came back on the third day.'

The son was amazed at his father's words and replied promptly, 'Is this what I get to hear on coming back after four years of earning wealth? You are the one who sent me away.'

The seth retorted, 'I don't want your earnings. Just go back the way you have come or you will regret it.'

Convinced that his father had gone mad, he turned to his mother and asked, if she too didn't recognize him? The mother had no answer either. Then the son remembered the incident of the dhalus with his new bride and recounted it to his parents. He showed them the fresh dhalus he had plucked

and asked to meet his wife so she could corroborate his story. The father was so angry that he threatened to beat up his son thinking that he was a trickster trying to get into a rich family.

The wife was still moaning with pain and the midwives barely managed to save her life. The women who went out of the seth's courtyard spread the word around about the two husbands. Within no time a huge crowd had gathered in front of the seth's mansion talking about the husband who had enjoyed marital bliss for four years while the other one was away.

When the seth saw the gathering crowds, he was very angry. Foaming at the mouth, he began saying, 'This is our personal matter. We will resolve it. Why should all these people interfere? I say, the one who came later is a fraud. I'll have him kicked out.'

'Father, what madness is this?' shouted the son. 'Do you wish to call a pan the sun and the sun a pan? Investigate properly, if you wish. This is sheer injustice!'

Where would there be another such opportunity to put down the rich. People of the village became adamant that justice should be done. The guilty must be punished. The practice of having two husbands cannot be perpetuated. For the rich, it doesn't matter, but for the poor, it would be impossible to ignore the community and its norms.

It all became very complicated. People didn't tire of talking and the buzz reached the wife in the labour room. Four years had gone by like a dream but for how long could a dream be a consolation? Miserably, she wondered what she would have to face now.

A midwife opened the labour room door and gave the news of the birth of a girl. The stressful moments when the new mother hung between life and death had now passed. They were lucky that she was alive! The women outside the labour room heard the crying of a child and the ghost standing outside came back to his senses. And as he became conscious

of what was going on he felt numb all over. How had lightning struck him a year before time?

The mother and father stood amazed and dumbstruck. The villagers wanted a decision from them to clear the honour of the entire village and punish the outsider. One of the two men had to be a liar. Some blamed the man who had lived as a husband while others felt that family honour could be saved if the man with the dhalus agreed to just go away. After all, what more did he want when they were ready to pay him any amount of money that he asked for. But the man refused to admit to being a fraud while the other one just kept silent.

The seth tearfully appealed to the villagers, 'What would you gain by ruining my family's prestige? We have lived like brothers. We have helped each other in times of need. My son's good qualities are not unknown to you. Is there anyone who has not benefited from him? My honour is in your hands so please let the matter be settled somehow. The fellow with the dhalus is a cheat. Just throw him out of the village.'

The elders of the village said, 'If need be, we can sacrifice our lives for you but here the prestige of the entire village is at stake. This man is again and again talking about dhalus. Ask the daughter-in-law at least once. What harm would it do?'

But who could ask such a thing? And how? Then some elderly women came forward and volunteered to find out. A group of women entered the labour room. The new mother's abdomen was twisted with pain. When she caught the drift of what was being asked, she forgot the pains of labour—she was gripped by a much stronger pain. She gritted her teeth and spoke with difficulty, 'If a man had asked this, I could have said yes or no. As a woman how dare you ask such a question? Leave me alone. Couldn't you find a better time to harass me?'

The old womenfolk came out scoffing, 'No woman will come out with the truth at such a time. Something is wrong but you decide what it is.'

The elderly menfolk put their heads together and said, 'Only the king can settle this. We have to safeguard our own interests too. Let us at once hand over both the husbands to the king. It is between the court and the seth then. However, the community's word is final. Whatever everyone decides, let that be done.'

After that, things were decided as per the wishes of the community. Finally, it was decided to tie up both the husbands and take them to the king.

When they began to tie the ghost, he realized that the situation had gone beyond control. He did not resist at all and made a request, 'Let me go to the labour room once. Let me see if the mother and daughter are well.'

But the crowd refused to let him go. They said, 'After justice is done, there will be a lot of time to find out if they are well. Where is the hurry?'

The two husbands, walked side by side, tied together. The seth too walked along with heavy steps. His pugree was undone and it dangled on his shoulders. On the way, the ghost saw the old khejari tree. Electricity ran through his body from head to toe, his feet stopped and he couldn't think clearly. Memories flooded his mind but a tug on the rope he was tied up with brought him back to the present. His feet moved once again—left and right, left and right.

The businessman husband, tied with him, was in a confused state of mind as well. How can the truth fail any test? He was so baffled by what he saw. What was the mystery? This man looked like his own reflection. He spoke to the ghost gently, 'You know that I'm the seth's son. I am the real husband who has taken seven rounds of the holy fire. Tell me who are you? What illusion is this?'

The ghost was all-powerful. He could, if he wished, wring the necks of those sitting in judgment over him. He could work miracles. If he decided to possess somebody's body he could ruin that person. But four years of love had purified his heart. He could no longer tell lies even if he wanted to;

but how could he reveal the plain truth? He had to protect his beloved's honour too. He said, 'I am the diminutive being that lives in the body of every woman. I am the lord of love. I desire love and affection more than money.'

The husband of the seven sacred rounds interrupted impatiently, 'Don't tell me these useless things. Tell me plainly; was it you who held the bride's hand in marriage under the marriage canopy?'

'What is the meaning of joining only hands? Marriage vows cannot be valid for life. One can trade things, not love. You began trading in love. When you do that, this is the result,' the ghost responded. The real husband's heart began pounding. He had never had time to think of these things.

The villagers were moving fast hoping to get justice from the king. On the way they came across a shepherd. He had a long sickle-staff in his hand and his hair curled out underneath his red pugree. He sported a thick, black beard and wore silver anklets. His body was covered with bear-like hair and he had thick eyebrows and tufts of hair grew out of his ear lobes. He struck his wooden sickle-staff in their way and asked, showing yellowed teeth, 'Where are you all going? Perhaps the whole procession is going to a death feast.'

The matter was explained to him two or three times before he grasped it. He laughed and said, 'Why bother the poor king for such a small thing? I can solve this problem here? Drink water from the river and rest. What a shame to your region that no man could decide the matter! Here you all are walking to the king for such a petty problem!'

People thought that the king's court was a long way off and if the shepherd could decide something, then why not? It would save them from the long, tedious journey.

The shepherd looked closely at the two men and marvelled at the creator who sometimes played such tricks. These two were as alike as two peas in a pod. He untied them saying to the villagers, 'Good people, why did you tie them, they can't run away with so many of you around.'

He then looked at the headman of the village and asked, 'Hope these two are not deaf and dumb?'

The headman said, 'Not at all. They speak fluently.'

At this, the shepherd had a good laugh, 'Why have you taken so much trouble then? You could simply have asked them. After all, one of them is a liar.'

The villagers smiled inwardly. The shepherd was a dumb fool. If these two would speak the truth, there would be no trouble. They should have known better themselves—had he the capacity to impart justice, he wouldn't have been running after sheep, holding a wooden sickle-staff in hand, all day long.

Putting the rope together, the shepherd said, 'I understand now. The two are capable of speech, but they have learnt to tell lies too. It doesn't matter though. To get the truth out is child's play for me. I will stick my sickle-staff down the throat and pull the truth out. Why, even the branches of the khejari can't stand before my sickle-staff, Tell me, who is ready? The one who opens his mouth first, is truthful.'

The ghost began thinking that he could have gone through this silly rigmarole, had it concerned only him. But now if the secret came out, it would spell trouble for his beloved. Had he known all this, he would have stayed in the thorns of the khejari tree. He was adept at ghostly tricks, but he was unaware of human wickedness. He would accept whatever he heard from humans. Soon enough he opened his mouth wide but the seth's son did not budge. He wanted to crush the shepherd to dust—he didn't utter a word.

The shepherd patted the husband who had opened his mouth wide, and said, 'Well done, my boy. See, how these foolish people have troubled an honest man like you. But they must feel satisfied—there shouldn't be any doubt left.'

He waved at his sheep grazing around, and said, 'The one who can collect all my sheep under this khejari, before I clap seven times, will prove his claim.'

The ghost turned into a whirlwind and rounded off the

sheep before the shepherd could clap even five times. The seth's son kept standing still with a long face. He didn't move an inch. As thick-brained the shepherds are, so is the crude justice they extend, he thought. The shepherd said, 'None but a true husband would have courage like this. Still, a small test remains. Till then, rest a while.'

Putting the sickle-staff under his arm, he opened the water-bottle's mouth and drinking its water in one long gulp, belched loudly. Passing his hand over his stomach, he said, 'Whoever enters the water bottle by the time I snap my fingers seven times, will prove himself to be the lawful owner of the bedchamber. Remember this! The other will be beheaded.'

People looked at the sickle on the staff. It was keen-edged—one head would soon be rolling in the dust.

Before the group could assess the sickle's sharpness, the ghost had entered the water bottle. These ghostly, age-old tricks were not new to him. Within an instant the shepherd tied the mouth of the water bottle with a string and shut it tight. He then turned to the village jurors proudly and said, 'Only this much time is required for extending justice. Sure I am going to lose my water bottle, but I had taken the initiative to do justice only after giving it a thought. Let's all go to the river and throw the bottle there. The cool waters of the river will take him to his "wedding bed"! Now, have you got justice or not?'

All heads nodded in agreement.

The real husband's happiness knew no bounds. He was a thousand times happier than he was on his wedding day. His hands shaking with happiness, he took out a ring from his finger and offered it to the shepherd. The shepherd had already understood his intentions, but he refused the ring. With a smile that showed his yellowed teeth through his black beard he said, 'I am not a king who charges for meting justice. I just helped out in a difficult situation. What use is the ring to me? It would neither fit my fingers nor the sickle-staff. Even my sheep are as boorish as I am. They eat grass, but

don't even sniff at gold. Such useless things befit only rich people like you.'

By the time the ghost understood the rough and shoddy justice of the shepherd it was too late. Still he shrieked from inside the bottle, 'Have mercy on me! Just once, let me out. I will be your slave as long as I live.'

But who would pay heed to the ghost! Triumphant and relieved, they all reached the river. The water bottle was thrown into the running water. The lover husband got the winding, turbulent, stormy waves as his wedding bed. Relieved, the villagers, the seth and his son proceeded to the village.

Reaching the mansion, the son promptly ran to the labour room. A midwife was massaging the baby with butter-oil. Another woman was combing the mother's hair. The husband could barely wait to narrate all the details of the shepherd's justice. With each word the mother felt as if a hot, sharp spear was being dug into her heart. This was far more painful than childbirth. Not a word or sigh escaped from her lips. She simply sat like a stone idol.

After narrating the entire story the husband observed, 'Why are you sad, though? If my own parents, who gave birth to me, couldn't tell us apart how could you? You can't be blamed. The wretched ghost got what he deserved. Once he was imprisoned in the water bottle, he pleaded and called the gods. Finally, we got rid of him by throwing him in the river. The bastard will never dare cheat anyone again.'

After this, the new mother did exactly what she was told to do. She never showed unwillingness for anything. She ate all the herbal sweetmeats prepared by her mother-in-law, took a head bath when the mother-in-law ordered. She dutifully worshipped the sun and sat and prayed with the brahmins. The women sang folk songs and auspicious gruel made of molasses was cooked for her. She went to the pond and worshipped the water god at her mother-in-law's bidding, adorned in a yellow chunari. She rocked the baby in her cradle

and offered prayers to water-filled pitchers. She made beautiful auspicious motifs on the floor and put henna on her palms. She dressed as she was told and decked herself up with gold ornaments. It was indeed a blessing to have a good daughter-in-law like her.

After the Jalwa Pujan the daughter-in-law climbed the stairs of the bedchamber wearing a yellow chunari and her jewels. She had her daughter in her lap and her breasts were heavy with milk. Yet her eyes were vacant and her heart desolate. In the bedchamber the husband was waiting on the bed. Within this very bedchamber she would have to spend, god knows, how many lives! If only the baby daughter now suckling at her breast did not have to live a life like hers, then her suffering would have some significance! Even the cattle are not used this way against their wish—they too resist. What choices are given to a woman in her life? Till she reaches the funeral grounds, she has to adorn the bedchamber and from the bedchamber the only way out leads to the funeral pyre.

s i x

lajwanti, the shy woman

Once upon a time, a village flourished in the lap of nature. It was like any other village—the same old and new huts, dung-smeared walls, with the plaster peeling off. Every home had the same earthen hearths and blue smoke. Men wore the same old pugrees, tilting at an angle, and carried the same wire-wrapped wooden staffs. Women from different communities wore different lehengas with similar veils pulled over their faces. The bleating of the sheep was the same and so was the dust that their hooves kicked up. People bickered and squabbled in the same way and had the same problems. They were bound by the same chains and constraints. The water troughs, fodder and the dung of their cattle was the same. The same wells and the same water. The same thakurs and the same thakuranis.

The village was on a hillock with a pond situated about a mile and a half away. The pond dried up by Diwali and water from wells was used after that. And then it was the same pulleys, buckets, and ropes. Women with their pitchers came by as usual. The tinkling of their jewellery made the pathway festive and the air, fervent with desire, encircled the groups of singing women. Rays of the sun caressed their beauty and trees bowed in obeisance to them.

The group of women, as soon as they left the village, seemed to grow wings; wings in their voices and wings in their hearts. But there was one woman among them, who was modesty incarnate. Even when she was alone with her

friends, she wouldn't take off her veil. She was oblivious to the jokes and ribaldry that went on amongst her companions. She didn't respond to any conversation or teasing and had to be spoken to twenty times to get some response. She had pink wrists and a yellow chunari. The two colours seemed to have quit their places on the rainbow and settled in her. On her colourful *indhuni*, there was a shining brass pitcher and a rounded pot as if the brass-smith had put a piece of the moon there. Just as no water spilled from her pitcher, no word ever spilled from her lips. The women got tired of teasing and joking with her although she did smile occasionally through her veil.

Once, fed up with her, a friend taunted, 'If veiling one's face is proof of being virtuous, then all of us are shameless whores.'

Even this did not prod her enough to speak. She looked at her friend and turned her face away. Another friend pitched in saying sarcastically, 'Don't you ever take off your veil. If the sun breaks from his orbit to kiss you, the world will forever be in darkness.'

Another friend commented, 'Or a male bird could peck your cheek.'

'Perhaps she's more scared of women than of men. Something terrible must have happened in her childhood,' said another woman.

Another one nudged her and added, 'Someone was saying that she was born veiled up to her navel and was all made up and adorned.'

A middle-aged woman said, 'All these barbs have no effect on her; spit never sticks to a polished surface. What we'll do is, I'll hold both her hands and one of you quickly flip her veil, and then we'll see her face.'

'What if she is cross-eyed?'

'May be she has pockmarks.'

'May be she has a hare lip.'

'And may be her teeth ...'

The sudden sight of her face left the tip of the tongue caught between the teeth and cut off the sentence midway. Perhaps it was better off behind a veil! All the women's faces fell as they realized that even the full moon pales when faced by the sun. 'We are all grateful to her for the veil or her beauty would have lured even the most committed of our husbands. Such beauty needs to be locked away.'

With these words, the woman who had removed the veil dropped it back on her face and a cloud seemed to have covered the moon. The friend sighed saying, 'If this moon shines so bright even during the day, god knows, what kind of shine it has at night?'

'Her husband would know this better than god.'

The entire group of women came to a standstill. A middle-aged woman said, 'With such a perfect beauty around, no man would look anywhere else even in his dreams.'

One woman said, 'I would rather die than trust men; for them opium is sweeter than sugar candy.'

'Perhaps,' responded another, 'But we are forgetting the fact that if all the bumblebees flocked to one flower, it would be terrible for other flowers.'

Laughing, another one reminded them nastily, 'Just think, how terrible it would be for that one flower.'

Just then they saw a man passing by. He held two white pigeons in his hands and was lost in a world of his own. While talking to them, he looked up and saw the women on the way. They did not mean anything more to him than perhaps a cluster of trees or some stones lying on the way. He changed track and took a different route. He wore a white pugree, white angarkhi and a white dhoti. His beard was ebony black and though his face couldn't be seen clearly, he had a good physique. He went past them, all the while talking to his pigeons.

All the women looked at each other as the middle-aged woman said to Lajwanti, 'I challenge your beauty to make this man dance to your tune.'

friends, she wouldn't take off her veil. She was oblivious to the jokes and ribaldry that went on amongst her companions. She didn't respond to any conversation or teasing and had to be spoken to twenty times to get some response. She had pink wrists and a yellow chunari. The two colours seemed to have quit their places on the rainbow and settled in her. On her colourful *indhuni*, there was a shining brass pitcher and a rounded pot as if the brass-smith had put a piece of the moon there. Just as no water spilled from her pitcher, no word ever spilled from her lips. The women got tired of teasing and joking with her although she did smile occasionally through her veil.

Once, fed up with her, a friend taunted, 'If veiling one's face is proof of being virtuous, then all of us are shameless whores.'

Even this did not prod her enough to speak. She looked at her friend and turned her face away. Another friend pitched in saying sarcastically, 'Don't you ever take off your veil. If the sun breaks from his orbit to kiss you, the world will forever be in darkness.'

Another friend commented, 'Or a male bird could peck your cheek.'

'Perhaps she's more scared of women than of men. Something terrible must have happened in her childhood,' said another woman.

Another one nudged her and added, 'Someone was saying that she was born veiled up to her navel and was all made up and adorned.'

A middle-aged woman said, 'All these barbs have no effect on her; spit never sticks to a polished surface. What we'll do is, I'll hold both her hands and one of you quickly flip her veil, and then we'll see her face.'

'What if she is cross-eyed?'

'May be she has pockmarks.'

'May be she has a hare lip.'

'And may be her teeth ...'

The sudden sight of her face left the tip of the tongue caught between the teeth and cut off the sentence midway. Perhaps it was better off behind a veil! All the women's faces fell as they realized that even the full moon pales when faced by the sun. 'We are all grateful to her for the veil or her beauty would have lured even the most committed of our husbands. Such beauty needs to be locked away.'

With these words, the woman who had removed the veil dropped it back on her face and a cloud seemed to have covered the moon. The friend sighed saying, 'If this moon shines so bright even during the day, god knows, what kind of shine it has at night?'

'Her husband would know this better than god.'

The entire group of women came to a standstill. A middle-aged woman said, 'With such a perfect beauty around, no man would look anywhere else even in his dreams.'

One woman said, 'I would rather die than trust men; for them opium is sweeter than sugar candy.'

'Perhaps,' responded another, 'But we are forgetting the fact that if all the bumblebees flocked to one flower, it would be terrible for other flowers.'

Laughing, another one reminded them nastily, 'Just think, how terrible it would be for that one flower.'

Just then they saw a man passing by. He held two white pigeons in his hands and was lost in a world of his own. While talking to them, he looked up and saw the women on the way. They did not mean anything more to him than perhaps a cluster of trees or some stones lying on the way. He changed track and took a different route. He wore a white pugree, white angarkhi and a white dhoti. His beard was ebony black and though his face couldn't be seen clearly, he had a good physique. He went past them, all the while talking to his pigeons.

All the women looked at each other as the middle-aged woman said to Lajwanti, 'I challenge your beauty to make this man dance to your tune.'

The woman who had taken the veil off said, 'Though he has eyes, he is blind. The eyes of his heart are closed too. God alone knows what kind of a man he is!'

'I have doubts about his virility,' added another one.

'And when did you get a chance to test this?' Another friend walking alongside raised a question.

'In my dreams, of course,' responded the other, smiling.

Some women commented, 'You are still luckier than others.'

This time Lajwanti opened her lips. She asked innocently, 'Aren't you ashamed of discussing all this behind your husbands' backs?'

One of the women responded immediately, 'All beauty and modesty are for you, there is nothing left for us.'

There was no point in arguing with them. In any case, she was a woman of few words and from that day onwards, she began to remain totally silent. She often remembered her wedding day when she had felt as if the very sky and earth were married. How could anyone abandon the oaths taken before the fire-god, she thought.

The man holding white pigeons in his hands continued to pass by them although he now walked slightly away from them. Lajwanti continued to watch his white clothes and the white pigeons through her veil. One day a friend said, 'If this man just gives the word I am ready to become his hen pigeon. Then at least he would pursue and hold me in his hands.'

The other friend responded quickly, 'If he gets to know this, he'll give up catching pigeons.'

One friend turned to Lajwanti and said, 'Don't you wish to be a hen pigeon?'

The shy woman spoke in a low tone, 'Why would I wish to become a hen pigeon and forsake a happy human existence? How many men in the region are as handsome and wise as my husband?'

'The gold one possesses is less precious and interesting than

someone else's trash. Can one control the fickleness of the heart?' a middle-aged woman added.

After that all the friends tried to outspoke each other and concluded that the veiled woman had no heart or desire in her. She was like a beautiful stone statue that could move, speak and breathe.

After this, similar jokes and frivolous comments continued everyday. While walking on the way or drawing water, whether the pitchers on their heads were full or empty, the same conversation went on. It seemed as though all other topics in the world were exhausted.

Lajwanti finally had enough and burst out, 'It is sacrilegious to stay with you all even for a moment.'

This hurt her friends. 'Do whatever you wish. Fulfil your own duties. But remember, you are a woman and a young and beautiful one at that. How will you fetch water all alone in this lonely forest? We are in a large group, yet we are afraid.'

Lajwanti said frankly, 'A person who is not a thief has no fear of light. My man trusts me, my in-laws have faith in me. Who should I fear and why? You seem to be afraid for some reason but not I.'

From that day onwards the entire group shunned her. She remained unaffected and didn't look for any company. She would go fetch water all by herself. When the sun-god himself was her protector, why fear any man? Let the man with the pigeon meet her on the way. As it is, he always walked away from them all. He didn't even glance at her. Even if he came with a naked sword, rather than with pigeons in his hands, what could he do to her? But the other men of the village were scoundrels. They were married yet were so lecherous that it seemed they had never seen women. For these men, even eating the cooked flesh of a beautiful woman would not be taboo.

The peculiar man with the pigeons was discussed now and then in every home of the village. No one wished for

such a child from even the most barren womb! God knows what joy he derived from being alone. The madman had wasted all his inheritance on the pigeons and must surely have been the leader of a pigeon flock in his last birth. He wanted to own a thousand white pigeons and no one could convince him of the absurdity of his ambition. Nothing other than the pigeons interested him—neither cattle nor fields, neither wealth nor family. Though born a human, he spent all his time with pigeons.

He wouldn't let even water touch his lips before he had captured two new pigeons everyday. God alone knew which corner of the jungle he got his white pigeons from. When he did catch the birds, he felt as if he had caught the sun or the moon. And once they lived with him, the birds never left. It was as if they had come back to the parents who had given them birth. Not only pigeons, kites, vultures, crows and snakes trusted him too. But he reserved all his love for his pigeons. He used to feed them and caress each and every one of his birds.

Once, Lajwanti had a strange premonition and asked her younger sister-in-law to accompany her to the well. After hearing the full story, the sister-in-law pacified her, saying, 'The man with the pigeons needn't scare you. He won't harm anyone even in his dreams. Why are you afraid of him when the innocent pigeons trust him so much.'

After this, every second or third day it would so happen that she would see the man on the way. When she couldn't see his face through the thin veil, sometimes she would turn around and take off her veil to look at him. He, however, was absorbed in his own thoughts and carried on walking on his usual path. The shy woman would then make a face and mutter to herself, 'Foolish fellow! His mother's womb has been wasted carrying him for nine months. Why doesn't he change his path when he's a man? It's natural for a woman to be timid, but what is he afraid of? He must be demented.'

Once, after filling water from the well, she was putting

the rope away when she saw him coming that way. The path ran close to the well. Another man would surely have come and asked for water but, this man had eyes only for his pigeons. When he was crossing the well she called to him by waving and clucking her tongue. At this, he turned to look at her. She gestured for help lifting the pitcher, but he merely stood there. Standing where he was, he spoke like a child who does not understand, 'I have pigeons in both my hands. If I let go of them they'll fly away.'

Having said this he went on his way and Lajwanti stood transfixed like a stone statue. When she came to herself, an invisible fire seemed to burn her youthful body. Death would have been better than this! When she picked up the small pitchers, they felt like two heavy stones.

Next day she took two bigger pitchers and set off a bit earlier than usual. As it happened, when she was putting the rope away, she saw the man approaching. He was at a very little distance from the well. Perhaps he was going to look for pigeons. As he got closer, she began to inch the veil down slowly with her right hand, pretending that the veil was dropping off on its own. It appeared that her hand and her body were not her own.

As he came closer, she spoke to him, 'Both your hands are free today, how will you refuse me now?'

The sweet words surprised the man. He glanced at her and murmured, 'I need only twenty-one more pigeons now.'

'So, catch them, but at least help me with the pitchers right now,' said the shy woman, smiling.

'Who helped you yesterday?' he asked.

'Yesterday, when you refused, I was so angry I picked them up myself.'

'Where is the anger today?'

'No amount of anger will help me lift these pitchers,' she said.

'Why, what is different today?'

'Don't you see how much bigger the pitchers are?'

'Who did you think would help you with the pitchers?'

'Some good man who is not holding pigeons in his hands right now,' she said.

Nodding his head, he said, 'If you have trusted me, I will not let you down.'

He helped her lift the pitchers and was soon gone. Neither did he talk further nor even turned back. It would have been better to be veiled, she thought. Since the beginning of creation, no beautiful woman had suffered such humiliation. Feeling angry and insulted, the road home seemed long and tedious to her.

Next day she made her sister-in-law accompany her to the pigeon barn. She pulled the veil down to her breasts, opened the thatch door and entered. Such a strange sight it was! Lots of white pigeons were feeding on the grain that had been put there for them. They cooed and fluttered and climbed up to his shoulders and head. The birds paid no attention to the women as they got closer. They danced around the man, and with his pigeons around him how could his attention be diverted by anything else?

The sister-in-law called out, 'My brother's wife is here to see the pigeons.'

'You should have come earlier,' he said, feeding the birds. 'There is nothing better than pigeons in this world. You can't see properly with your veil down—don't be shy of the poor birds.'

Yet Lajwanti did not unveil her face. Her sister-in-law said, 'My sister-in-law has vowed not to remove her veil. Even I have not seen her face properly.'

She watched the birds through the veil for some time and then went away. The man remained lost in feeding the birds.

When Lajwanti came back home, the memory of the fluttering birds continued to haunt her. There was sweet cooing and fluttering all around in her bedchamber. Absent-mindedly she caressed her husband's cheeks and said, 'You'd look nice with a beard.'

And, with this suggestion, Lajwanti closed her eyes and imagined that her husband's arms were the man's and lost her senses with the touch of his beard. What a night it was! What dreams she had!

Next day, halfway to the well, she saw the man of her dreams. They were now walking towards each other. The woman had two empty pitchers on her head and the man had two pigeons in his hands. But why didn't he shy away from the path today? A shiver ran through her body and she felt there must be something evil in his heart. It was a lonely jungle where no one could hear her shout. If something were to happen what would she do?

But she didn't have to do anything. When he was about twenty steps away he called out to her, 'Only two more are needed now. My vow will be complete tomorrow. I forgot to make way for you—I'm so happy. But don't be afraid of me. I've not lived with pigeons for nothing.'

As Lajwanti felt more comfortable with him, she asked through her veil, 'Haven't you learnt to eat pebbles like pigeon do?'

The man answered in a low, serious tone, 'I did try to, but couldn't digest the pebbles. My stomach got hard and swollen and I almost died.'

As the woman overcame her shyness she smiled through her veil and said, 'The male pigeon is inseparable from the female but you are still unmarried. Obviously, you don't like women.'

He gave her a dazzling smile through his black beard as he said, 'I'll think about marriage only after my vow is complete tomorrow. It's not easy to find the pigeon woman of my dream. I made this vow for her. Once, twenty-two years ago I had an unusual dream and I'm still waiting for it to come true.'

At this the lonely water-bearer began laughing as she said, 'You must be out of your mind—you want to waste your life for some dream!'

A strange excitement gripped the man as he said, 'Wouldn't the blessings of a thousand pigeons grant me a pigeon who can be my beloved?' he asked.

She didn't respond to that and walked on saying, 'You and your silly dream! I'm getting late.'

She didn't turn back after this. The man's eyes were riveted to her lovely, long plait. His gaze followed till he could no longer see her.

Next day they met each other again at the same place. Holding two pigeons, he extended his hands in front of her veil and said happily, 'My vow is complete today. Surely my innocent pigeons will now make my dreams come true.'

After saying this, he looked up at the empty pitchers with a maniacal look in his eyes. Suddenly, Lajwanti whisked her veil away and spoke sharply, 'The innocent pigeons have taught you to be vile like a fox! I can see the evil in your eyes. You want to take advantage of me in this deserted jungle!'

'But I have pigeons in my hands!'

'So what? Can't the pigeons be put in the pitcher and the pitcher be covered?'

Her words made him dance with ecstasy. He said, 'It's exactly like my dream! I remember it like yesterday. My beloved pigeon, you have come to me after twenty-two years. Perhaps you were born the night of the dream itself. Let these pigeons fly. The sky is theirs.'

Lajwanti was overcome with joy as she heard him whisper, 'My dear beloved, now I can't be away from you even for a minute.'

She lost all her senses as the beard rubbed against her in reality and she asked, 'How could you stay away from me all these years?'

'It's only today that my dream has been fulfilled, so how could I feel the pang of separation earlier?'

As the pigeons freed themselves from his hands they flew away into the sky. The sky offered infinite possibilities, and so did their flight!

seven

the unresolved question

*What is better,
The seed or the fruit,
Darkness or light,
Sunrise or sunset,
The beginning or the end,
The end or the journey?*

As the world woke up to the sun god's rays, the caravan of Lakhi Banjara, the gypsy, travelled over some road on earth. His business was selling sandal and musk and he also traded in diamonds and pearls. Even the king held him in high esteem. Over and above all this, he had a gypsy wife who was more beautiful than the apsaras. The husband and wife were deeply in love and were two bodies living one life.

The gypsy's golden chariot moved along at the head of the caravan and the wife lay on her husband's lap. They were engrossed in conversation when the bleating of sheep interrupted them. The wife got up with a start and saw a huge flock of sheep crossing the road. The sheep were moving along with bowed heads as if communicating their well being to mother earth. The gypsy couple looked on in wonder and thought about how all living beings found happiness in their own existence. Suddenly, the gypsy saw a bear following the flock. He immediately put an arrow to his bow. As he was about to release the arrow, the wife took hold of his hand, saying, 'Stop! It looks like a man.'

'A man?'

'Look carefully, this could be a disaster if it is a man!' said the wife anxiously.

The gypsy made a face. 'Killing it will be no disaster. Such a creature is a blot on the name of man. It must be killed to maintain human dignity. The sight of this man shames me. Don't stop me.'

The gypsy woman insisted, 'A man is a man. He may be powerful or weak, rich or poor, clever or innocent. The differences all depend on the environment and the company man keeps.'

This was as if the arrow that the wife had held back had passed through the gypsy's heart. He narrowed his eyes and spoke in a thundering voice, 'Environment! Company! How can my wife talk like this? What our ancestors have said can't be wrong. As is the seed, so will the tree be. A shrub of berries can only produce berries, not mangoes. Heredity is what is the most important. The very womb that nurtured him must have been flawed.'

The wife smiled, 'No mother's womb can be flawed . . .'

The gypsy cut her off mid-sentence as he shouted, 'How dare you compare my mother's womb with this animal's!'

The gypsy woman had never heard him speak so harshly before. She was both shocked and hurt. Losing her cool, she retorted, 'It is neither the womb of a mother nor the seed of a father that is at fault. Life is what shapes one. What you see and hear is what you become.'

By now the husband was very angry. He said, 'You mean that the fame and name I have acquired for myself have not been of my doing. Why does the king value me then?'

Any argument would have been pointless so she hid her smile and remained silent. The quiet, suppressed smile struck the gypsy's heart like lightning. He pulled her out of the coach and began to drag her towards the animal-like figure walking on all fours.

'You dare to compare me to this man! Just look at him,' he shouted.

He continued to drag his wife as he pursued the bear-like man who had long nails, muddy, matted hair, and rough feet and hands. His clothes were made of bark. His bright teeth shone when he broke into child-like, uncomprehending smiles. He drank like the sheep, dipping his muzzle into the water. The gypsy couldn't help laughing at the creature. He let go of his wife's hand and said, 'What possessed you today that you irritated me for nothing! Now, do you believe what I said?'

The wife remained silent. Quietly she stared wide-eyed at the deformed man while her head whirled. She thought, can't I even express my opinion? Do I slave for him just for my clothing and my food? Food satisfies only hunger and all clothing, no matter how expensive, is just cover for the body. Do I have no identity except as his bed partner? Humiliation seemed to burn each pore in her body.

The husband's anger disappeared when he noticed her silence. He touched her cheeks lightly and said, 'It is so like you to utter a senseless thing and then regret it.'

It seemed to the gypsy woman that her heart was being sawed into two. She jerked her head and spoke with a cheeky smile, 'Regret? What regret? I stand by my words.'

This enraged the husband. What a swollen headed, pampered woman! What an ego! The whore was crossing her limits. Grabbing hold of her plait he said, 'All right, stand by what you said. I should have known better than to pamper a bitch. Return all the jewellery I have given you and enjoy your life with this creature. I always knew that only an animal could satisfy you.'

She could think of several replies to these disgusting words but she kept her lips shut. What reply could one give to such shameless accusations? Death was preferable to such a marriage. The wife's face soured with revulsion.

Afraid of the pursuing couple, the bear-like man was

running ahead. He had never seen anything like this in his life. Though he could not decipher their words, he kept turning around to look at the couple. Why were they following him? What had he done to them? When he saw the man yank the woman's plait, he had understood that it was an aggressive gesture. Maybe the man was molesting the lone woman. His eyes burned with rage. Like a shell from a cannon, he bounded to where the gypsies stood. The gypsy's face blanched when he saw the staring, bloodshot eyes. The long nails could kill anyone who came within their grasp. He grabbed the bundle of jewellery and slowly inched backward. His wife didn't turn around even once to look at him.

After a while, the wild-man thumped his chest and began making gestures to tell the woman that while he was around, she would always be safe. He was more powerful than any animal. Just then, he pointed up the road, startled. The gypsy woman saw a shepherd coming their way, staff in hand. He wore a rounded, red pugree and a silver bangle on one wrist. His greying beard was parted in the middle and the man was grinning from ear to ear. He spoke to the wild-man, actually aiming his words at the woman, 'How has this fairy come to someone like you? Have you ever seen your reflection in water?'

Though the wild man was unfamiliar with human language, he understood that a jibe was being directed at him. He showed his teeth and made a vague gesture. The shepherd came close and, without being asked, began narrating how twenty-two years ago he had found a child crying outside a jackal's den. He had kept the child and raised him like an animal. As a result of that upbringing, the child had grown up to be much better than the human beings who walked on two feet and spoke the human tongue. The boy worked as hard as ten shepherds and tended to the sheep so well that no animal could harm them. The wily shepherd didn't have to spend any money on the boy who, like the

monkeys of the jungle, ate whatever he could find. The shepherd didn't need to cook for the boy, or give him clothes, or provide him a place to stay. If he had been in contact with humans, would he have worked for anyone else? If he had raised the boy as a human, he would have had to get him married off as soon as he came of age and there would come the hassle of raising his children. With a family, he would always look out for himself. The shepherd had nothing to fear now. Because of the boy, he could lounge about under the neem tree and waste time hunting lice.

The gypsy woman heard the whole thing seriously and then said, 'So far, you have had it easy, killing lice. From now on you will have to take care of your own flock because I'm going to take him away.'

The shepherd was shrewd. He knew that arguing was pointless. But he was not going to be defeated by a mere woman. What she needed was a blow to the head to set her straight! As he swung his staff, the bear-man jerked it out of his hand. He tried to escape, but a powerful blow on his back flattened him. The wild-man was ready to tear the man's heart out with his sharp nails but one gesture from the gypsy woman stopped him. The shepherd's life almost quit him. He lay there, completely motionless.

The gypsy woman was relieved. She had never imagined that this man who was so animal like could be so powerful and yet, so intelligent. With such a protector she could live in the jungle unmolested. There was no need to go anywhere. She would make him a normal human being right here in this very forest. There could be no condoning the crime committed by the shepherd out of sheer greed. A financial loss would be a more fitting punishment for him than death itself. And even death is not a suitable punishment for people who are ready to kill at the least excuse. Death, for them is a way of life. Someone who understands the importance of life would not even dream of killing anyone.

After a while the shepherd got up, groaning. **She already**

knew what she had to do. She said, 'You have got what you deserved. If ever you look in this direction again, I will have you hanged. You don't know who I am and I am not going to tell you. If you value your life and you wish to see your dear ones happy then don't ever think about getting your flock back. Send a good barber tomorrow morning or else these sharp nails will find your neck even in the safety of your home.'

A rustic listens either to the language of fear or of violence. Important people scare him more than death. When used by one in power, even a blade of grass works better than a sword. The frightened shepherd did not utter a word. Folding his hands in supplication he quickly retreated and kept them folded till he reached home. Such are cowards—sheep in front of lions and wolves in front of sheep.

As soon as the shepherd left, the wild-man jumped around, shrieking with joy. He climbed a mango tree and began plucking and throwing down ripe, yellow mangoes. Then he jumped down, collected the mangoes in a pile and looked at the gypsy woman using his eyes to invite her to eat.

Though she was not hungry, how could she say no to such an innocent appeal? She softened one mango by pressing it and began sucking it and offered another to him. He refused twice and then took it. Trying to copy her, he pressed a mango too hard and its juice squirted onto his dust-laden beard. He looked crestfallen and ashamed. However, with the next mango, he got it just right. He pressed the mango to soften it and offered it to the woman with a fresh, childlike laugh. She accepted the offering. It was as if food had acquired a new taste. No sooner was hunger satisfied that it rose again and as soon as she ate, was satisfied again. The man too ate as if he were tasting food for the first time in his life.

Gradually, the evening grew darker. A little apprehensive, the gypsy woman now realized that daylight gave so much assurance. As the sun sank, so did her heart. How would she find her way in the darkness? Her husband left her behind,

just as cattle leave behind their dung, with no second thought. On top of that he thoroughly insulted her. She had always been dependent on others, first her father, then her husband. Now she had an opportunity to live her own life, to make something of the deadweight that she had been dragging around all these years. She had a chance, now, to chart a new future for this wild man.

Darkness slowly thickened. Night seemed to have descended individually on each tree, as if each tree was drinking up palmfuls of the light. Yet, here, the darkness was different. The stars were different and so were the eyes that were gazing at this spectacle. What magic was this!

For a while the wild-man kept awake, and then sleep overpowered him. He sprawled there, snoring. At first the snoring disturbed her, but she soon lost herself in her own thoughts. Even in her dreams she had not imagined that lying awake in the dark could be so beautiful. She had always seen only the darkness of the night. But today that very darkness acquired a new luminosity. How fascinating! How enchanting! The naked light of the sun paled before such beauty. She had either gained new sight or the darkness had changed form.

Every tree wore a sparkling, dusky cover and stood, unmoving. She drank deeply of the fathomless darkness all around. Suddenly, the womb of the sky was torn apart by a red orb that slowly turned golden. A little light slowly diffused in the darkness. All these days nature was the same and so were these eyes but she had been blind. Today the web lifted from her eyes and gave her new sight. She was her own mistress from this day on and no one had his hooks in her. She decided that she would make the wild-man such a human being that he could compare with the best. The thought gave her more pleasure than she would have felt if she had conceived.

She wouldn't trade this peace for even the peace that Kumbhkaran feels when he sleeps. There was no sound, no movement; there was silence all around, as if nature itself had stopped speaking.

Suddenly, the call of some unknown bird reverberated in the jungle, and a quiver ran through the gypsy woman. She looked up and it looked like even the stars were shivering like her. The wild-man was still snoring. She felt assured rather than irritated by the sound. As long as he was close to her, she need not be afraid of even Yama, the god of death. When the cry of the bird died away, the creaking of the cricket took over, and it sounded as though nature was playing some musical instrument to entertain the moon.

By the time day broke, the woman had spent most of the night counting stars. Birds began to chirp in the east and the light of the morning drowned all the stars of the night. The morning star alone stood strong for a while but eventually, the light overpowered it.

The snoring stopped. The wild-man got up with a start. He smiled at the gypsy woman and, leaping, disappeared into the jungle for his ablutions. Hearing footsteps, the gypsy woman turned around. She saw a man with a box on his shoulders. He might be the barber. He was middle aged, and wore a pugree the colour of sandalwood. He walked with his back bent, arching his long, thin body.

When the wild-man saw the stranger, he charged at him, roaring. The gypsy woman restrained him, and all his anger instantly vanished. She then signalled to him the processes of shaving and bathing and he refused outright. But when she insisted, he reluctantly agreed.

The barber was a clever man who understood everything without a word being said. Along with his instruments, he had also brought a dhoti and a towel. He took the wild-man to a stream close by while the woman waited, thoughtful and expectant.

She saw the barber coming towards her. He was holding on to the wild-man's arm who was wearing a dhoti. She could not believe her eyes. Slightly bent, the wild-man walked with some difficulty. Yet, his whole appearance was transformed. His coppery-hued body shone like an ember

that has been dug up from the ashes and fanned; he looked as strong as an acacia tree. When he saw the woman, tears welled up in his eyes. They didn't know whether those tears were of pain or of love. Trying to smile, the gypsy woman too started crying. Unwittingly, she gripped the wild-man's arms with her hennaed hands and began devising ways of straightening his back. He understood what she was trying to do and, in one jerk, straightened it himself. Though his height had increased only by a hand, it seemed to the woman that he touched the sky. The touch of the soles of his feet validated the earth's existence. The sun itself tilted its head to look at him. He had a sharp nose, a long neck, big eyes and eyebrows and eyelashes made of the darkest black ink. He had long arms and a tiger's slim waist.

When the gypsy woman held his hand and walked, his feet started moving after her, as if of their own accord. The earth itself undulated under his feet as though she were unwilling to let go of their touch. The witnesses to those first pure steps were the sun, the earth and the countless bushes and shrubs.

After a while the barber asked to leave. The woman happily gave him her pearl-encrusted rakhadi, the head ornament that was a symbol of her marriage, as a gift and asked him to bring all the paraphernalia of the kitchen along with some clothes and a pugree. The barber hurried away and returned quickly after stopping for a smoke at the shepherd's place. He talked about the wild-man and realized that the hurt in the shepherd's heart was far more than the pain in his back. He couldn't sleep. He kept hearing the bleating of his sheep but there was nothing he could do to rectify the situation without the barber's help.

The barber was in a tearing hurry. He reassured the shepherd and, putting the bundle on his head, strode into the jungle. When he reached, the duo was grazing the sheep. The wild-man smiled at the barber. He showed the barber how he had learnt to drink out of a leaf cup. The barber

smiled at the wild-man's innocence and his eagerness to learn new things. He said, 'In no time you will leave even us behind.'

The gypsy woman exclaimed, 'God bless you for saying that. I live only in the hope that god sends me that day soon.'

The clever man was the head of the barber community there. Offering flattery, he said, 'That day is already here. All you have to do now is something to ward off the evil eye.'

Embarrassed, the gypsy woman said in a low voice, 'Who can cast an evil eye here except the trees and the sheep?'

Both looked at the wild-man. He didn't understand what was being said but he began laughing and kept laughing for some time. The innocence of that laughter enhanced his beauty.

The days quickly passed. When a person sleeps, his knowledge, understanding and his memories all fall asleep. When he wakes up, all these come back to him. In the same fashion, as soon as the wild-man began walking upright, his learning accelerated, as if he were just revising the lessons of a previous birth. The woman had difficulty being a teacher, but he was a quick student. He had to be told only once how to tie the dhoti and pugree, button the angarkhi, eat and bathe. He was already a masterly shepherd who could compete with the very best. He had mastered, without being taught, the different sounds that the sheep make and he would walk around all day baaing and bleating so that it became difficult even for her to silence him.

Despite constant repetition, he could not learn the names of the sun and the moon. He said that such a small name for a god who gave heat and light to the world was an insult. A name for the sun should be big, very big and when uttered, it should burn the mouth.

If one called the sun the moon and the moon the sun or a frying pan it would not make much difference. But how was one to compare a mote to a mountain! Yet they were both signified by letters. If fire's name is not fiery enough to singe the tongue when spoken, then of what use is that name?

She heard his arguments in silence. She had never before heard such questions and had no answer for them.

The transformation from wild-man to shepherd had changed his entire being. Once when she told him her name she said, 'How dry and tasteless! No, your name should be more beautiful than the moonlight. Don't make me learn these useless names.'

The next moment, he burst out laughing. Pointing at the sun he said, 'if he can be called the sun you must be "Lakhan", one among many lakhs.'

These words of praise made her blush but she also felt pride. Intending to push the issue she said, 'You have not yet fully learned the language but you talk glib! You have never seen another woman but you talk of one among lakhs.'

'With a teacher like you, there's little I have not learnt,' he answered.

'Am I to be blamed for that little too?'

'Surely we can't blame the sheep for it!' he said.

At this they broke into such laughter that the whole forest resounded with it.

Regular massage with sheep's milk and *ubatan* packs made his body shine. His palms and the soles of his feet too became soft. The delicacies cooked by the gypsy woman whetted his appetite. To her it looked like every particle of the forest was dancing with joy. She had no idea that her wish would be fulfilled so quickly.

One day he asked, diffidently, 'Should I learn only what you teach me or can I ask questions?'

'Sure, ask whatever you want, I will be happy if you do. Actually, I was about to suggest the same thing,' she said.

'What is a kiss? Why haven't you told me about it yet?' he asked, averting his eyes.

The woman was shocked. Which new tutor had he found? When he knew so much, how much longer he would continue to need her. She felt as if all the joints in her body had come

loose. Hardening her heart, she said, 'You still have to learn a lot. It's not wise to hurry things.'

Yet he was impatient to learn. Without stopping to consider even a minute, he said, 'I have one more thing to ask. Tell me the truth. What do you hide behind the raised mounds on the front of your blouse?'

Hearing this question from the uncomprehending shepherd, the woman lost all composure. Instead of giving him an answer she asked, 'Who taught you these things?'

The young shepherd was not yet used to telling lies. He told her it was the barber.

Her head began to swim. This is what she had feared. How was she to control him, this shepherd who day after day was learning new things? How she wished she knew some magic to make him a fly and keep him always with her! If she wasn't firm with him now, matters would get out of hand. She told him sternly, 'Avoid the barber, his company is not good for you.'

He smiled, 'You are really talking like a simpleton. Even animals can't survive alone, leave alone humans. Man's achievements stem from togetherness. How can the poor barber harm us? He serves me eagerly as much as he can and these days he treats me with deference. Besides, now that you have taught me so much let me learn more, discover new tastes and see new places.'

The woman stared at him in amazement. He understood her amazement and began to elaborate with doubled vigour, 'I'm afraid to tell you this, but I am not myself these days. I sometimes want to roam the world like a hurricane.'

She felt her heart stop. Stammering slightly, she asked, 'Alone?'

'Why alone? I will go with you on my shoulders. Now, I don't even want to die alone. That's how good a disciple I am.'

At this, she gained some measure of relief. Smiling, she said, 'You have become good enough to become my teacher!'

She couldn't continue any further. Her tongue stuck to her palate. She had no control of her tongue, her brain or her heart. If she delayed now, he would be lost. Only the pleasures of the night would hold him to her. And, since this was to happen sooner or later, why risk losing him by delaying it?

The tumult in her heart did not remain hidden from the shepherd. He had been checking himself with difficulty, thanks to the constant egging on by the barber. If he lost the opportunity today there was no telling when it would come around again. Not meeting her eyes, he said, 'Why did you hide all these things till now?'

What reply could she give to this? Lowering her gaze and absently raking the dirt with her toe, she said, 'We women cannot speak about many things. Our words have to be carefully measured.'

He knew he had reached the limit of what he could make her spell out but did not want to acknowledge that limit. He asked, abruptly, 'But, do you know these things?'

Lips trembling, she whispered, 'Yes, I do.'

A sweet intoxication spread over his limbs. So, this was what the barber had been talking about. Caressing her cheeks, he said, 'There is no need to know the things one cannot speak about.'

Her beautiful face reddened even more, 'This knowledge comes naturally, and there is no need to learn it from anyone,' she whispered.

The sign was clear. He had been waiting for precisely this moment for many days. It is only when you seed the oyster on time that it produces the pearl. And then, no talk was possible, nor was any thought. Two pieces of the sun fell out from the sky and merged with each other.

The moment was perhaps the first time since creation that time and air had any opportunity to stand still. Only when the two let go from their embrace did time and air realize the significance of that union. She said, her eyes still closed, 'Nothing is in its place, it seems. The roots of trees must have

loosened. Maybe the sun and the mountains too have moved from their places. Do go out and check on nature's well being.'

But he was lost in his own pleasure. He heard but could not decipher what she said. Playfully reprimanding her, he said, 'What kind of a teacher are you? You've been teaching me useless lessons and the lesson you should have taught me first, you didn't. Still, I've not been miserly in paying you your gurudakshina.'

Her eyes spoke. She said, 'You cannot get off so cheaply, there are many more payments to be made.'

When they came out of the hut shortly, it was as if nature, dancing to the beat of their passion, had changed all her colours. The grass was greener and, in the west, the sun seemed to have rioted with red. The birds returning to their nests sang sweetly.

Suddenly the shepherd remembered something. Clicking his tongue regretfully, he said, 'Your love made me forget the sheep. They must be thinking that I ignored my duty towards a thousand for the love of one. I'll come back in a bit.'

A little afraid, she said, 'I will also come with you.'

'Why do you bother? I can manage the flock on my own.'

'I am your shadow, I will always be with you,' she said, following him.

A question had been troubling the shepherd's mind for the past few days, but he hadn't had an opportunity to ask it. When he heard the gypsy woman say this, the question popped out, as though on its own, 'How did you leave the man whose shadow you were earlier? I have a blurred memory of him pulling you by your hair that day.'

She felt like her heart had been smitten by a tiger's paw. Like a line drawn with water, all her memories of the past had disappeared or maybe, unknowingly, she had wiped them all away. But these memories had not completely vanished. When the shepherd asked his question all of them came alive. Nature's beauty suddenly vanished. Each leaf as well as the

cries of the birds seemed to be mocking her. At times she had wanted to tell him this herself, but could not. Where was the need to broach this topic now, she thought. When she spoke, the pain in her words was palpable, 'It would have been good not to have heard this question form your lips but now . . .'

He cut her off in a hurry and said, 'Let it be, if you don't want to talk about it. It was just a casual question.'

She sighed deeply and said, 'Had you asked casually, I would have told you happily.'

He couldn't think of an immediate reply so he began calling the sheep loudly, adding, 'If you get angry like this, I won't listen to you.'

This comforted her. She said, 'It doesn't matter if you don't want to hear other things, but you just have to hear this.'

She then narrated the story at length. Though he feigned disinterest, he was all attention.

He soon discovered that the friction between husband and wife had started because of him! If the husband had not left his wife, he would still have been the wild man that he had been. This realization stung each pore of his being. Yet, he spoke seriously, 'So, his beating you brought you closer to me. His anger changed my life. I cannot pay back this debt even in seven lives.'

The words cut into her heart like a dagger. With difficulty she asked, 'What about me? Is what I have done nothing in your eyes?'

He responded in a remorseful tone, 'That's a completely different issue. I don't have words enough to express my gratitude to you. But what would have happened to me had your husband kept quiet that day. I won't be at peace till I've paid that debt I owe him. It's just a matter of time, you just wait and watch!'

What she had feared most was coming true. She said in a choked voice, 'I have no desire to see anything else now. These sheep, these trees, these hills and the springs are more than

heaven to me now. I have reached the final frontier of happiness here.'

'But my happiness is still a faraway dream for me. Why do you want to keep me confined here? That is something that cannot happen. I want to reign over the sun and the moon too. The air, the light and the moonlit nights will be my handmaidens. The barber, who has told me all the secrets that have been kept from me, will be my diwan. He said, I was the abandoned son of the king and soon when I am king you will reign as queen.'

Shaking the shepherd violently, she shouted, 'No, no, we don't need all this. What are kingdoms worth compared to what we have here?'

The shepherd tried to pacify her, saying, 'It is because I feared such a reaction that I didn't tell you the secret. Now my will recognizes no bounds. And, if you react so, how are you any different from the shepherd who was the owner of this flock. He kept me here to serve his selfish ends. He never let me come near another human. And now, you, after teaching me so much, want to keep me tied up as well. No, this can never happen. My prowess cannot be limited to this forest; it's beyond even my control. If you had wanted to stop me at this stage, you should have never taught me the ways of man.'

It was like her tongue had been lopped off. She tried hard to speak but couldn't say anything. Resting her shoulder on the shepherd's shoulder, she began to cry bitterly.

They suddenly heard the rumble of chariots and the neighing of horses. With a start she looked around. Far away, on the road from the village, she saw the blinking lights of torches approaching. The shepherd wiped her tears and said, 'It looks like the barber has put together a regular procession. However he may be otherwise, he is true to his word. Crying at this moment will be a bad omen, please don't. I am to be anointed king tomorrow, the fourteenth day of the moon.'

What could she do when faced with this waking dream?

She forced herself to be calm. Soon enough the shining torches came closer and stopped. Many people got off the chariots. The original owner of the flock and the barber came to pay obeisance to the prince. The old king too came with the procession, the crown trembling on his shaking head. Beside himself with emotion, he said in a choked voice, 'My darling prince, how many times have we combed the jungle looking for you! But everything happens in its own time. We had eyes, yet we were blind. We saw you many times but each time we went away, unrecognized. How could we see the prince in that four-legged animal? Blessed be this barber who told us everything. I instantly knew that it was all true.'

Turning to the owner of the flock, the king said, 'But, which sin have you avenged by doing this? You had the audacity to deny everything, though you were questioned a hundred times.'

He fell at the king's feet begging, 'I have committed a great sin, my lord! Even death is not enough punishment for this.'

The king's anger soon vanished. He assured the shepherd, 'Don't be afraid. After all it is you who kept the prince alive. Ask freely for whatever you want. I don't want to be indebted to you.'

The flock owner fell at king's feet and said, 'I am like a dead man without my flock. O protector of the poor, give my flock back to me. I desire nothing else.'

The king smiled, 'Your foolishness is beyond compare. The flock has always been yours; all the prince has done is just graze it. Here, take this naulakha necklace.'

The gypsy woman watched everything, wide-eyed. To not believe the evidence of her eyes was not possible but believing took courage that she did not have. What were these events that were transpiring, willy nilly?

The royal priest told the king, with folded hands, 'Lord, this is the auspicious moment to leave this place. Any delay will ...'

‘What delay? How can one let such an auspicious moment go by?’ said the king with some asperity.

How could the barber be lacking in such a situation. He quickly opened the mouth of the water-bag. Washing the prince’s and the gypsy woman’s feet, he said, ‘It is better to let the dust from the jungle remain in the jungle. Please take the trouble of seating yourself in the chariot.’

The prince said to him, sotto voce, ‘Stop fawning, be mindful of the status that being a minister brings.’

It was the barber’s brains that had brought about this gain in status and that could never be forgotten. The barber said in a syrupy voice, ‘If a shoe gets its rightful place on the foot, it is enough.’

No one had much time to talk. The chariot promptly turned around. The gypsy woman’s bad dream moved forward with the galloping hooves of the horses. Who knows when this runaway chariot was going to come to a halt.

The king put a trembling hand on the gypsy woman’s head and said, ‘Daughter, though the gratitude I feel cannot be expressed I must still say this. The one thing I am sad about is that my queen is not here to see this day. I doubted my virtuous wife. I was misled by my courtiers and suspected her of a liaison with my diwan. She committed suicide the day after the baby’s birth. I got the diwan hanged and the newborn abandoned in the jungle in front of a jackal’s den. On the seventh day when I learnt of the conspiracy and my mistake, I regretted my action very much. I searched every possible corner of the forest but could find my son only when the stars were favourable. It was only with the barber’s information that our travails ended. We have found the big garlic shaped birthmark that the royal priest mentioned and even the blind can see how much the prince resembles me. It was only with your touch that the prince’s fate has changed. If it hadn’t been for you he’d have wandered this jungle, a wild man despite having been born of a royal womb. My

last wish has been fulfilled today. Tomorrow, after the anointment, I will go to Kashi. As long as I am alive, I will pray to god that he bless you with health, wealth and many sons.’

Suppressing the turbulence in her heart, the gypsy woman touched the king’s feet. This filled the king with such gratitude that he could barely utter the words, ‘The saviour is greater than the killer. Why should you touch my feet? I should be touching yours.’

And indeed, the king bent his crowned head at her feet. The gypsy woman held him in her arms before he could actually do it. Both of them freely expressed the turbulence in their heart by the tears in their eyes.

The prince was lost to the world in his dreams. As much happiness as could not be contained between earth and sky was in his heart. From wild-man to shepherd and from shepherd to the owner of the land, what a change that was! His life would not be worth anything if he did not rule over the world. Till he ruled over the very light, air and sea, he would not rest. Before he had even worn the crown or sat on the throne, his dreams aspired to touch the sun and the moon.

In complete readiness, the city eagerly awaited the prince’s arrival. As the procession entered the city, a hundred and one cannons saluted him. Thousands of welcome ceremonies were performed and many blessings showered on him. Songs were sung in his praise as innumerable pundits went through the holy texts to decide on the most auspicious moment for the coronation.

After giving him a bath with scented water, a group of maids kept hovering around him. Each maid was more beautiful than the last. With just two eyes, he found it impossible to take in all that beauty. His brain and eyes became dazed. Finally, after consultation with the pundits, when yesterday’s shepherd ascended the throne, he felt as if he had been ruling the earth for ages.

Courtiers, lords, royal maids and servants were all over

the place, drunk with happiness as they witnessed a shepherd, the owner of a flock of sheep, become the king and the gypsy woman of yesterday, become his queen. A royal decree accorded the position of diwan to the barber. An estate of seven villages was given to the shepherd who had saved the prince's life. Lakhi, the gypsy, offered a thousand and one gold coins to the king as he was given the royal permission to ride an elephant.

In accordance with what he had declared earlier, the father of the new king, accompanied by five priests, started his journey to Kashi, the holy city, on foot. The new king and the new diwan began to draw out strategies to usurp weaker states. The queen tried once or twice to put sense into the king's head. She reminded him that ambition had no end and so expansion of one's boundaries would never end. It only disrupted peace and caused tension.

Yet, the king's aspirations were sky high and the queen's advice seemed like mindless babble to him. He was intoxicated with his newfound power. Meanwhile, the queen became pregnant and was totally absorbed with that. She would be a mother in the tenth month. Both husband and wife cherished different dreams. The king dreamt of adding new boundaries to his kingdom and was occupied with newer pleasures. The queen's eyes nourished dreams of the coming baby. She thought of how she was going to raise the child and what she would teach him. All day and all night she wondered if the life of the wild-man was better or the life of the shepherd or the life of the king on the throne of luxury.

Countless servants attended to the king. One order from the king would bring thousands of maids scurrying to him. All vied with each other in paying obeisance. Valuable gifts and magnificent offerings were made to him. Even a mute stone statue would lose its head; this was a mere king, made of flesh and blood. He had roaring youth, burgeoning ambition, the drunkenness and the arrogance that power brings. To top this were the schemes and the webs the courtiers

spun. Self serving sycophants like the gypsy, Lakhi, the new diwan, and the flock owner surrounded him. Wine flowed. Everyday, new girls were brought in for his majesty's pleasure, sometimes young virgins and sometimes women in the fullness of their womanhood. The king's day of debauchery began with the setting sun and ended with the rising sun. Inwardly, the queen simmered with anger. Her heart smouldered day and night. There was no one in the whole kingdom to understand her pain.

One day, drunk and tottering, the king saw the queen coming towards him. He said, 'You have the audacity to come in front of me when you know that I feel like vomiting when I see your swollen belly. How dare you?'

The queen wanted to spit fire, but she had to swallow her anger. As she turned to go, the king held her by the hand, saying, 'What airs a mere gypsy woman has! I can crush you under my feet. You must be thinking that you have obliged me by turning me from a wild-man to a human being. Let me tell you, I was happier in the forest. You are responsible for my plight. God knows when and where will all this end! But don't forget, I can destroy you whenever I want.'

What could she say to such ugly words? She jerked herself free of his hold. Babbling this and that the king lurched into the palace. As had now become the norm, he forgot everything as soon as he found a new girl on the royal bed.

The queen, on the other hand could not get a wink of sleep. Her vacant eyes kept drinking the darkness of the night long after she had put out the oil lamp. With a small effort on her part, the four-legged wild-man had become king but now the most strenuous effort would not reverse that process.

The mistake that she had made could not ever be corrected nor could she ever atone for the sin that she had committed. And there was no escaping punishment till the last generation of her line had died away. Just as her eyes staring into the darkness were empty, her mind too became empty. Since then,

the pregnant mother has been stuck in that pleasure palace, groaning with the pain of parturition. And till the time her dream slips out of her womb, the questions roiling inside her will not be answered.

e i g h t

to each his own morality

Who has managed to overcome the desires of the heart and who can? Who has sorted through the innumerable little buds in the human heart and who will? Who had mapped the labyrinth of truth and lies and who will? Who has sieved rainwater and who will? May the sun-god grant eyesight to all as sharp as his own light.

In the court of a king there lived a bard who, even after three marriages, could still leave younger men in the dust. Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge, resided on his lips. He had a sharp mind and was the heart and soul of every gathering. No one could speak in his presence and if anyone did, his voice sounded strange to his own ears. The king could not stay without the bard's company. It was amazing how the bard's advice worked like medicine for the ruler of the land. By the end of the day when the king's stomach bloated with wind the bard would make him laugh over and over again and that would cure him. The bard's words made the king laugh spontaneously and when he was amused, the court sycophants laughed doubly loud.

Incidentally, the sharpness of the bard's brains was matched by his looks as well. He was a tall man with a firm, well-shaped body. Age seemed to have stopped at thirty-three years for him—as a matter of fact, at times, people wondered if the clock was moving backwards in his case. The king—five years younger than the bard—actually looked eight to ten years older.

His good qualities notwithstanding, the bard was lax in his morals. He was witty and flirtatious and could charm any woman. But when it came to his wife, the Thakurani, all that he had to offer to her was a constant frown on his forehead. Once when she gathered enough courage to ask him the reason for it, he said, 'You are my partner, yet you don't know the reason for it? Tell me, which tree in the world can touch its own shadow? The clouds that drench the world remain dry themselves. Tell me, can the air cool itself? Besides,' he said, 'it does not become a woman to laugh or smile.'

The wife asked innocently, 'Why must one restrain tears and laughter? These are gifts of nature.'

'Man's ingenuity lies in harnessing nature. When nature is exposed it has to be covered—that is why we put on clothes. The best of human knowledge is always kept under wraps,' advised the bard.

Removing her veil partially the wife said, 'This knowledge of yours will remain incomplete till men don't veil their faces.'

The bard touched his vermilion pugree and said, 'Women's faces and men's knowledge are best when veiled. Laughter unveils a woman's modesty besides adding to the danger of loss of character,' he opined.

This dose of knowledge he had to impart to the Thakurani was long overdue. This third wife of his had already spent seven months with him, yet he had not had the opportunity to elaborate upon certain important matters. Today I must do so, if this wife of mine does not take my counsel, he thought, she will meet with the same fate as others. It would be better to warn her beforehand. Women in a household must not be paid any attention during the day—they tend to lose all deference that way. During the seven months, she must have heard other people's talk and learnt that any stepping beyond the limits would not be looked upon kindly. It had so happened that for the last two wives of the bard, death had come swiftly through strangulation.

The wife, on her part, had all this information before she

got married to the man. What could she do when the very parents who had given her life willingly ignored these facts! The first duty of a daughter is to blindly accept the hand of whosoever is chosen by her parents. When she heard from her husband about how laughter loosened women's characters, she questioned simply, 'And what about those men who are loose in morals all the time? Doesn't that matter?'

Who could challenge the bard's vast storehouse of knowledge? He responded promptly, 'Men are made differently, so they behave differently. They cannot be compared to women. A man can do anything; he can piss in the open. But if a woman were to do that she's sure to meet a fate worse than death. My earlier wives had to be punished by death because of such things.'

'But were they really set right?' she asked. 'I think the punishment served no purpose at all because there cannot be any repentance for sin after death. Moreover repentance in life is certainly more painful than death. A repentant person dies every moment of his life. Once you leave your mortal body, death ceases to pain,' said the wife.

The bard remained thoughtful for quite a while and then said, 'I didn't know that consorting with me has had such a positive effect on you. But make sure, and don't let it so happen that ...'

The Thakurani cut him short, 'May the goddess Jagdamba bless me—you too have to be careful now. You may not have greyed yet, but black hair too has sanctity.'

The husband impatiently interjected, 'Of course. And who knows more about the sanctities of black and grey hair better than me? Yet, women's morality cannot be compared to men's or vice versa. One cannot shut one's eyes to disparities made by nature.'

Looking thoughtfully through her veil, the wife fixed her gaze on the pointed moustache of her wise husband and politely submitted, 'I will not forget the lessons I have learnt today till I die. It is good that the cover of illusion has been

removed. I will remain indebted to you for the coming seven lives.'

The bard's knowledge was as potent as his consorting. Whatever doubts he had in his mind about his wife were gradually put to rest from that day. He began visiting the court with renewed vigour. From then on, his words became even sharper. With a smile playing on his lips, he would make the king and his companions laugh heartily. And as his words eased the king's stomach, the bard's sexual urges would soar higher. He would then race his horse home. The maid of his choice would reach his bedroom for that night. After that initial conversation, the new wife never complained. The advice that there were different parameters for men and women had taken gradual root in her heart. Now and then when the husband looked for her company, she would promptly make herself available to fulfil the expected marital obligations—and she was aware that she had to pay the price of matrimony.

The days rolled by merrily on the slopes of pleasure. After a five-mile ride on his horse, the bard would present himself in the court early in the morning. An unspoken wave of merriment would spread all around. It was as if the essence of the king's life itself was anchored in the poet.

One day as soon as the bard took his seat, the minister said, 'You have a long life for we have been talking of you.'

The bard addressed himself to the king saying, 'Under my lord's patronage, even a year seems like just a moment.'

The king couldn't resist smiling. He said, 'Let me ask you something and you must answer me fearlessly.'

The bard answered politely, 'What fear have I in your benign presence, my lord?'

'Nothing seems to intimidate you—aren't you afraid of me at all?'

'But I don't commit any mistakes, so why should I be afraid? I would rather die than be afraid of my lord.'

The royal guru whispered something in the king's ear. The

king nodded and said, 'The scriptures say that it is better to remain in fear of fire, king and water. Either the scriptures lie or you do not consider me king!'

The poet responded with folded hands, 'My opinions are immaterial, my lord. If the owl does not accept the presence of the sun, the sun's potency is not diminished. Fire, king and water do not harm, if one uses them properly.'

Doing away with all complicated talk, the king asked directly, 'The distance to your residence is fixed, yet some say that since the arrival of the new Thakurani, it takes you less time to reach home. Others say that your keenness to come to me makes the way shorter for you.'

'What does my lord think? You know well what is in my heart,' said the poet, suppressing his smile.

Shaking his head, the king said, 'Hmm, that's a lie; who can fathom another's heart? How would I know what you think?'

The bard insisted, 'I still think that my lord's and my hearts are aligned, though your highness may not think so.'

The king repeated, 'They are different which is why I say they are. Even a mother and her child have different hearts. If I drink water, would your thirst be quenched? I would not bleed if you were hurt. Give me an honest answer without any trickery.'

The bard had a ready answer to this too. 'My lord, when I am coming to the court, I barely notice the distance and time, but when I am going back home, it definitely feels like it is doubly further and to reach it takes double the time. As for my wife, I can substitute her with twenty-one similar wives, but not so with you, my lord. Even if I use the sun as a lamp, I will not be able to find another master like you,' said the clever bard.

The king roared with laughter, 'I said the same thing to the minister, but he thought differently. I too married seventeen queens but it would be impossible to find your replacement. No matter how beautiful and virtuous my wives

may be, they cannot outdo you. My stomach settles down only after I have listened to your words.'

How can the talk in a royal court ever halt? Topics of discussion change with the clap of the hands. The king thought up a new doubt. 'You are a pleasure seeker yourself. Tell me, why is man not satisfied with one woman? Why is he ever-thirsty?' he asked.

The bard replied, 'My lord, we all know that we tire of even the best of sweetmeats! Gratification demands change. Repetition kills all enjoyment.'

The minister interjected, 'What if the bowls you eat out of change? The food inside always remain the same. Get it?'

Once again, the bard had already thought of an answer, 'I understood that even before you told me of it. But, despite your understanding of the matter, why did you marry nine times? We all know the truth, but certain things are better left unsaid in public. Get it?'

Forcing himself to smile, the minister said, 'When you teach, we have to learn.'

But the royal guru could not hold his tongue. He said excitedly, 'This high philosophy of yours is beyond me, for you all know that I am devoted to my wife. Why didn't she tire me?'

Bard's instant reply to this was, 'Nobody tires of the humble bread, onion or red chilli.'

This made all the courtiers laugh loudly. The king doubled over with mirth. The guru went pale in the face. When their laughter subsided, he said quietly, 'I don't eat onion and chilli, but if only the simile of sweetmeats suits you, then my wife is no less a delicacy.'

Those who have the king's ear cannot be controlled, and the bard retorted, 'How would we know that? But I don't understand what you are saying, for women and sweetmeats do tire one. Anyway, no two people think alike. Some people like me are like an open book, but others like you have better credentials.'

The royal guru lost colour, as if someone had drained all blood from his body.

Just then, the queen walked up to the bard with all her ornaments tinkling delicately. Sitting in the balcony, she had been listening to the discussion. She looked the bard in the eyes and asked sarcastically, 'When you men tire of sweetmeats and women, you opt for a change of taste. What of us women? Change is taboo for us, though we too may tire of our husbands. A widowed woman either dies of hunger or she burns herself at the pyre of her husband.'

Under the pretext of sparring with the bard, the queen had directed her bitterness towards the king. For years she had borne his indifference in stony silence and now she had found a new voice.

The king's face fell. How was he to blot out the searing truth of those words? He squirmed for a bit, then said haltingly to the bard, 'I don't know. You alone can give us the true answer. You have never been so quiet before.'

The bard then recovered his composure, 'Your highness, I have umpteen answers to offer, but I would rather withhold them in deference to the throne. What I have said has been written in the scriptures and wise men of yore have spoken these words. It does not become a queen to lose her calm like this.'

This made the queen laugh. Her laughter had the flash of a cannon ball as she said, 'What becomes us may please be left to us to decide. Undigested knowledge should remain unexpressed.'

'But without the light of knowledge how could the veil of darkness be removed from your eyes,' countered the bard with sweet asperity.

Something prodded the queen to say, 'What if this light blinds men?'

'Why should you worry about that?' asked the poet.

'Yes, those who have taken the responsibility of creation

in their wombs don't have to worry about petty things,' declared the queen.

The words fell like hot molten metal into the ears of all the courtiers. Today, what she said had a different tone and a different force. They all looked blankly at each other. She reared back, and like an agitated cobra, launched, 'Have you nothing to say to this? I didn't know that scriptures had such weak roots!'

The words of the queen struck like sudden lightning. It was as if they were all tied up in a magic web. The king and his courtiers sat dumbly with sullen faces. Nobody had ever imagined that the queen who looked simple and as harmless as a cow could be so acerbic. No queen of the king had ever, even by default, made any complaint—bitter or sweet. Like the sun that loses its lustre under an eclipse, the seat of power too seemed to have come under the shadow of the words of the queen.

When women give up diffidence, even the gods have to keep quiet, and these were mere men! How can the eternal truths written in the scriptures be wrong? The mustachioed men became tongue-tied, as if bound by an invisible spell. Any vocal protest would have enraged the queen, but the crushed, shamed silence of the downcast eyes burnt her heart like live charcoals. When she could no longer breathe the abhorrent, sick air of the court, her feet unconsciously took her to the palace. As if in a dream, she avoided her marital bed and lay down on the floor to sleep. She no longer desired the comforts of the bedchamber.

Old memories welled up in the queen's heart. She remembered the fifth day after her wedding when in this very bedchamber she was lost in romantic thoughts as she waited for her consort. The king arrived soon enough but with an incomparably beautiful young girl with him. The girl's body seemed to have been moulded in moonlight. She had lustrous black hair and shapely eyebrows. Looking at her doe-like eyes, milky teeth and her fresh, unblemished skin, even the

queen could not restrain herself from kissing the girl. The king then observed, 'Don't blame me now.'

The queen mumbled, still kissing the girl, 'Why should I blame you?'

The king then spoke with his breath heavy with liquor and lust. 'How can I control myself if even you, cannot help loving her? I am afire with desire.'

Like a snake that has been stepped upon, the queen held herself upright and retorted angrily, 'I loved her like a daughter. Why, she must barely be ten years old.'

The king gave an acerbic smile and said, 'A woman is desirable as soon as she learns to walk. You will believe me only when you witness my desire.'

As the queen's dreams evaporated she asked in a choked voice, 'Why have you made this pretense of marriage if this is what I had to see?'

Completely inebriated, the king stammered, 'I don't have time to answer these questions. You will understand gradually after seeing what happens today.'

At a gesture from the king, a maid shut the doors of the bedchamber and secured the latch. The queen was now helpless.

She turned and averted her face from the drama that ensued. From the day of creation, no woman had ever been cursed to witness a thing like this. At that moment she felt no frustration, no pain, or reproach in her heart. As she stood like a stone mannequin in a void, a sudden, piercing shriek reached her ears and as she turned to look, she fainted.

Three days went by before the queen gained consciousness. As she opened her eyes, she saw the king's face and she closed her eyes once again. Not bothered about her well being, the king made a ludicrous query, 'One question has been worrying me for three days. Why did you faint when the girl cried out?'

When the king persisted she had to answer, 'How can I tell you if I do not know the answer myself?'

After that day the queen had no dreams left—neither in the day nor in the night. Could her dreams have withstood the monstrous drama in the bedchamber? Soon she was distanced even from her own self. Thereafter, the queen never showed any unwillingness in witnessing the tableaux displayed in the bedchamber night after night. If the bridal bed itself did not protest then how could the queen? Nothing seemed incredible any longer after she revised her perception of things. Commenting on the change in the queen, the king said one day, 'I am, now, really proud of your understanding nature. What's the use of bickering all the time? What the king does is right. The utensil at home is always at hand for use, the thrill is in using some other utensil.'

But what happened in the court today seemed to have changed the queen's perception once again. It was as if the queen was now allied with her own soul. She stood up abruptly and began pacing up and down in her bedchamber. When she stared at her reflection in the mirror she was confused. She couldn't recognize her own face.

She heard the maid say, 'It is time for your ride. If you want to go, I will call the groom.'

The queen looked at her face and said, 'Yes, call him.'

Riding was a regular routine. She changed into her riding habit and came down cheerfully. As always, the groom was standing at the bottom of the stairs, holding the mare's reins. She smiled at his salutation, took the reins from him, patted the animal and putting her foot in the stirrups, jumped on to the mare. The mare began to gallop and the groom's mare followed. No other rider in the neighbouring states could match the excellence of this groom. He had taught horse-riding to the queen and in three years she had become better than him. Yet a low-caste untouchable cannot be the teacher to a queen. Though he taught her, he knew his place. The queen noticed for the first time that the groom was youthful, handsome and appealing. It was public knowledge that the old minister had sired him. But how did that make things

any better for him? A child born of a lowly mother will remain lowly. All men can flirt around and play with lives, especially those in high places and they can be faulted only if god himself could be faulted.

So far the queen had viewed the mare, trees, stones and the groom with an even eye. They were all the same to her. Though the untouchable groom understood the difference between the acacia tree and the queen, there was no way he could express his feelings. He had to rein in his fantasies.

When the queen, riding beside him, lashed her whip on his back, he glanced at her diffidently. There was no anger in her eyes and he saw her smiling. Shivering with fear he asked, 'Have I done something wrong, my lady?'

The queen smiled bewitchingly and said, 'Had it been only one mistake I would have told you, but you have repeatedly been committing so many of them for three years now. How do I list them all?'

The horseman folded his hands and pleaded, 'You should have hanged me immediately. We lowly people do not deserve to be spared.'

This time, the queen tried to suppress her smile, 'You are at fault, but I have spared you because you're my teacher.'

'I am not even a speck of dust under your shoes. Calling me your teacher is worse than throwing me to the gallows,' he said.

The queen again hid her smile and said, 'You deserve this. If you do not stop making the same mistake, I am going to punish you more severely.'

The groom's heart began to pound. He stuttered, 'A punishment from you would be a blessing to me, if only I knew my fault.'

'Lots of people take long to understand even when they are told everything.'

'My lady, I am not that much of a fool.'

The queen said with sweet sarcasm, 'Why wait? We will test your intelligence soon.'

The groom was left with no answers. He tried to force a smile as he said, 'I hope three years under your feet must have given me a bit of understanding.'

'I thought the same way but I was wrong. You are so dense that you are unparalleled in stupidity in the whole world.'

The queen's riddles were beyond the groom's understanding. He rode quietly as his mare trotted along.

In a changed state of mind, it seemed nothing could hold back the queen now. Liberated from the age-old shackles of tradition, the queen had lost control of herself. She fixed her gaze on the groom and said, 'Tell me, are you blind?'

The groom lowered his eyes and said softly, 'You know the truth, my lady. I don't think I'm blind.'

'If you are not blind, tell me, am I ugly or beautiful?'

Without quite grasping the essence of the question, the groom was relieved that there was no possibility of punishment now. Before he could think, the words slipped out of his mouth, that there was nothing more beautiful in the world than the queen. Feigning irritation to hide her real feelings, the queen said, 'Then you are a bigger sinner than I thought. You acknowledge my beauty, yet you have never expressed this. Tell me honestly, didn't you ever desire me during these last three years?'

A current ran through the groom's body. What whim had overtaken the queen of the land! How would he propitiate the sin his ears had heard? As long as inner thoughts remained hidden, no crime was committed. As the queen saw him alighting from the horse, she too got down. Holding the reins of the horse, he paid obeisance to her seven times. He straightened and said, 'I must have done something wrong in my past life to be living this life. Why would I further ruin my future lives, my lady! Not even god can desire a queen's beauty.'

Irritably, the queen said, 'Leave god alone. I want to know what your heart desires.'

'Desire and heart? For the poor and the lowly like us? These things exist for the privileged, my lady! A small space near your feet would suffice for us. There is no happiness other than this.'

'You people can't perceive anything beyond your present existence.'

'Perhaps that is why we are called the low caste, my lady!'

'And we see so much happiness, that is why we are the big and mighty people, right?'

'There is no doubt about it, my lady.'

An old, massive, banyan tree on the banks of the pond slowly swayed with the draughts of air. As the groom saw it, he took the opportunity to divert the queen's attention and said, 'We have reached our usual spot. My lady, do we water the mares here?'

'Why, has something special happened today?'

The fact was that all the happenings of the day were unusual, yet it was not for the groom to say so. As they went on further without a word, the queen's mare neighed and following this, the other mare neighed louder.

The two mares trotted towards the bank. They neighed once again as they saw water.

The groom tied the mares, as usual, to the roots of the banyan tree after letting them drink water. The queen was wearing an attire that was the colour of grapes and to the groom it seemed that the daughter of the great banyan tree had just emerged on earth.

The water trembled with the touch of the wind as it aspired to quench the queen's thirst. As always, her feet led her to the water and as she crossed the shadow of the banyan tree it occurred to her that the groom too would be thirsty. Without hesitation she called out to him, 'Come, have water.'

As expected, the groom came running but with folded hands he said, 'You are truly magnanimous, but I can't do that. I would rather die than drink water from the royal pond.'

Teasing him, the queen said, 'If that be so then why are

you breathing the air coming from the royal pond?’

The groom answered helplessly, ‘Breathing is not within my control, but not drinking water is within my control, my lady!’

‘And, is it within your control to disobey me?’

‘Nobody would dare disobey you, my lady!’

Losing patience, the queen ordered, ‘Then, be quiet and come to drink water with me!’

The groom was caught between the devil and the deep sea. Either way he would offend her. Yet, he did not have the courage to ignore the queen’s orders! Traditions deeply rooted in his blood would be broken, but he had to do the queen’s bidding. Spontaneously, his feet proceeded towards the pond.

As he went on, his eyes fell on his own shadow. He jumped back mumbling, ‘Pardon me, my lady, I have committed a serious crime. I was not in my senses . . .’

The queen turned and asked, ‘Why, what happened?’

The groom folded his hands as he said, ‘My lady, my shadow fell on you.’

This made the queen smile despite the agonizing turmoil she was in. Even a stone would have smiled at such a thing. She said, ‘You madman, the shadow is seen either in the sun or the light. It would not be there in the dark. Tell me, what would happen if it was a dark night?’

The groom was now caught in a battle of wits. He stammered, ‘How could there be a dark night in bright daylight, my lady?’

The queen laughed loudly at this. Continuing to laugh, she said, ‘I had not imagined you to be so dense. Tell me, would the nightfall bring the night or not?’

‘Yes, my lady.’

‘And can the shadow be seen in pitch dark?’

‘No, my lady.’

‘Then, can the misdeed happen?’

‘No, my lady.’

Both stopped at the pond. Crystal-clear water was inviting two thirsty beings to quench their thirst, and they both drank with their palms to their heart’s content. Water quenches every kind of fiery thirst but today the groom experienced a deep satisfaction and exhilaration that was utterly novel to him. Could he ever have imagined that he would have the good luck of drinking from the royal pond and that too with the queen herself! Amazingly, the queen also felt no less happy and satisfied.

What new inner depths were opening in the queen’s heart? New thoughts tumbled around in her head. They had resumed riding for sometime when the queen turned to him to say, ‘You lowly beings remain blind to the beauty and youth of queens.’

‘One has to be blind, my lady,’ the groom interjected with folded hands.

‘You may choose to be blind, but there is no such rule for queens. What would happen if a queen desires an untouchable or a lowly person?’

He said, ‘Who can deny the wishes of queens, my lady! Who can rule over the ruler!’

The queen took a deep breath as she said, ‘You are right, who can rule over the ruler. Yet how long would such a rule last?’

‘You know best, my lady.’

‘I know, that is why I am saying this.’

With this she spurred on her mare and the groom followed her.

As they entered the royal palace the mares neighed loudly. The groom alighted first. Close to the stairs, the queen looked back. The groom was walking with the reins of the mare in his hand as usual. Yet today, she did not like the sight. Abruptly, she let go of the reins in her hand and climbed the stairs quickly.

As the dusty queen entered the bedchamber, she witnessed a familiar scenario. Sitting on the gold bed, holding a gold

goblet in her hand, the same girl was offering a drink to the king. During these three years, the girl had matured at least by six years. Her beauty lit up the entire bedchamber. But today the queen did not feel like kissing the girl—she now resembled the king so much. The queen knew the secret behind this but had never spoken out aloud. Today, as she looked at the two similar faces, words spilled out of her, 'You must be aware that this girl was sired by you.'

The king was drunk. If the queen could ask this, why should he hesitate! He responded promptly, 'Everybody in the palace knows this. Her mother was only a maid-in-waiting. I would die before I would commit a similar sacrilege with an honourably married queen.'

The queen smiled and said sarcastically, 'So you think you are alive. Bless your illusions and bless your life!'

Since he was not in his senses, god alone knows if the king understood the sarcasm. Right now he looked pleased as he said, 'Blessed it is. If a king's life is not blessed whose will be, tell me?'

Two maids were standing in attendance to the queen. On her return from the ride she usually bathed in perfumed, lukewarm water. Any delay irritated her. But today, she was quite late. When the maids hurried her, she said irritably, 'I will not bathe today. Go away.'

The maids were about to ask the reason when the king butted in saying, 'Let her wish be done, don't ask any questions. To the queen he said, 'Come now, do stay and watch the frolics of the bed.'

But the queen did not stay there any longer. In spite of having said no to the bath, she entered the glass-walled bathroom. The dust and dirt on the body can be washed away and every pore of her body could absorb the fragrance of attar. But without cleaning the centuries of accumulated dirt piled up on one's inner self, nothing can be clean. It seemed impossible to breathe without scrubbing away the degenerated, century-old norms.

But how could she clean the dirt and the rust and make things shine as they should? By aping the behaviour of men? Or by retaining purity in women's character? Why should the burden of purity be carried by women alone? Why should men and women be judged by different moral standards. The abysmal darkness cannot be dispelled unless and until the same morality exists for all. It was impossible to remove the cataract on men's eyes without surgery. No amount of reasoning would work with them and only when they witnessed unrestrained women would they understand the gravity of their own dark deeds.

The queen's heart was lost in thoughts such as these when all of a sudden she heard the disturbing wail of a woman and a cry for mercy. There was commotion outside and people had gathered from all sides. The agitated queen was the first to reach there. With a broom tucked under her arm, a sweeper woman was crying bitterly.

Putting a reassuring hand on her back, the queen gently asked, 'What is it? Tell me everything.'

By then a number of courtiers had gathered. The weeping woman said, 'I refuse to state my plea unless the royal court assembles.'

The antics in the bedchamber being over by then, the king stumbled in—intoxicated and dishevelled. At his command the court soon assembled. Though the royal guru tried to feign illness once or twice, on the king's insistence, he had to come. A horseman was sent galloping to fetch the bard too. Torchbearers stood on four corners in the court that was soon filled to capacity. Darkness was beginning to descend slowly and a few stars blinked their eyes to witness the unusual drama.

As soon as the king waved permission, the angry cleaning woman shook her broom at the royal guru and spoke words that burned the ears of the courtiers, 'I have put you all to trouble because of this decrepit old man here. He began abusing me sexually before I had barely matured. I never

complained till today; after all, what did it matter, I am only a cleaning woman. Let him know that he ruined his own purity and religion.

'Now, for the past fortnight he has been pestering me for my daughter. He tried to lure me by offering a necklace, but I refused. No mother will agree to such an offer. Yet my refusal had no meaning! Ultimately, yesterday he succeeded in raping my daughter who is his daughter also. My innocent girl is too young to understand the fine distinctions of religion and morality. A simple child like her can easily be lured with a silver ring. She came home sobbing. It would be better if you do not hear what happened further. I cried to myself for two days and finally when I could not control my pain, I was forced to come here to plead my case in front of the king. Ask the wife of the royal guru if you do not believe me. She knows everything. Her heart burns because of her husband's lowly deeds. Her chest is completely infected with tuberculosis, but she has never complained to her husband.'

Silence ensued in the court. As the courtiers turned their questioning eyes towards the royal guru, they saw him prostrate on the floor, frothing at the mouth with a vacant look in his eyes. A small box of opium lay near him upside down. He had swallowed opium as soon as the woman had started speaking. Other than quick death, what else could save a reputation such as his? Everybody present there went numb. For once, even the bard was left speechless. Slowly, and with difficulty, the royal guru spoke, 'You can know the truth from my wife.'

Whereupon the cleaning woman shot back, 'If he is such an honest man and has nothing to hide, why did he swallow opium?'

To which the bard's prompt response was that fear of false accusation cannot be underestimated and a respectable man may choose death over infamy.

With folded hands the woman reiterated that no justice would come to her with an interfering middleman in the

way. She would not leave without justice being accorded to her, she declared.

The wife of the royal guru was in no position to come to the court. With no other options left, the minister and the bard reached the mansion of the royal guru. The wife was lying coughing on the bed. She could hardly understand the question even when it was repeated to her several times. How did the secret buried in her household become public? When she was asked again and again the simple woman had to say that she was not allowed to say anything against her husband so there was no question of revealing or hiding anything.

They understood everything—no further elaboration was required. When the courtiers heard this, they all praised the wife to skies. What a wife! One in a million! She didn't utter a word against her husband even after all that had happened. Though every closet has its own skeletons, when the hidden shame becomes public, all hell breaks loose. As long as excreta remains in the stomach, nobody is repulsed by it, but once it is out, no one can bear the sight of it. Though all the men in the court outdid each other in debauchery, they couldn't reconcile to the misdeeds of the royal guru.

The cleaning woman appealed for justice once again but the bard said, 'God himself has given you justice. Tell me, does anyone punish a dead man? He will suffer in hell for committing suicide.'

The queen was standing close by. The sobbing woman turned to her and said, 'Is this the justice given to me?'

The queen's eyes were red with anger, but whom could she vent it on? It would be demeaning for her to appeal to the insensitive men around her. She turned to the sweeper woman and pacified her by saying, 'You expect justice from these people! What illusions are you living with? These men are incapable of giving justice. We women will have to find our own justice.'

The cleaning woman had come raving and ranting and

she left the court much the same way. The court was dispersed as darkness settled in as usual and millions of stars twinkled merrily in the sky.

As the bard came out of the court, he didn't mount his horse. He kept walking for some distance holding the reins of the horse in his hands. The royal guru had blackened everybody's reputation even in his death. What rankled most was how the cleaning woman, and an untouchable at that, could dare to appeal for justice in this manner? The accursed woman should be dragged all over the place with her hair tied to the tail of a horse. And what of the queen! Had she gone completely insane? If things continued like this, happy conversations and cheerful exchanges in the court would become things of the past. The king would no longer seek his company to ease his stomach. Something had to be done quickly.

He mounted his horse halfway from home. The horse tore through the dark and soon reached his house. His wife heard the familiar neighing of the horse, but she kept lying where she was, eyes closed. There was a lamp in the room and as the husband came to bed, she asked, 'Whose house have you purified today?'

The bard pretended irritation and said, 'There is no cure for your suspicion.'

The Thakurani replied, 'The whole world knows of your wild ways and I don't trust you. Tell me, were you in court till now?'

For the first time the bard was being truthful to his wife though in her eyes he had no credibility left. He recounted the happenings at the court and now her heart was in as much of a turmoil as the queen's. The bard tossed and turned on the bed for a long time. The wife who was as tormented as the queen said, 'You will not sleep tonight.'

'Why?'

'They say a thief's heart is always awake. The whole village knows our ploughman is of your blood. He looks exactly

like you. If the royal guru lured the cleaning woman, you did not spare the shoemaker's wife. You are birds of the same feather. Men are not trustworthy, nor bound by any limits. I feel, given a chance, you menfolk would woo your own shadow.'

The bard was tempted to wring her neck, but his self-esteem and ego were not with him today. He roared, 'These days your tongue has become too long. Beware of the consequences.'

Thakurani held her ground as she responded, 'Words will not keep coming to your rescue all the time. Sooner or later you'll be paid back in your own coin.'

For once the poet was silenced and remained awake for a long time. At the crack of dawn he left for the palace riding at his usual speed. This is just what the Thakurani wanted. By now she was fed up of listening to her husband's lectures—somehow they seemed odd coming from him. It was natural for the Thakurani to feel distressed with the hypocritical morality of her debauched husband. Only when women take to living a free life will men straighten their ways, she thought. Fire treats all equally and heats and burns whatever is put in it.

The youthful ploughman used to come to the house frequently to tend to the animals and milk them twice a day. He was in the yard feeding the cattle when the Thakurani, in all her finery, went close to him and said, 'You understand the thirst and hunger of the animals, but you've never bothered about my cravings. I've been writhing in hunger and thirst for so many days, and today, I'll speak openly. Do you understand what I'm saying or not?'

Timidly, the ploughman said, 'It is not my destiny to understand something like this, madam!'

Breaking into a smile the Thakurani said, 'You have a favourable destiny, though you don't have the courage to make use of it.'

Something made the young man say, 'You have an excess of courage. It wouldn't matter if you lent me some.'

'You madman, you think courage is transferable? You are a simple lad. It's my bad luck that I want you because you are so handsome.' With this she embraced him, and then he too responded. The touch of the untouchable purified the Thakurani's body. Yet, she felt that she had to make her husband aware of her affair to make him come to his senses.

Rearranging her clothes and looking deep into the young man's eyes, the Thakurani asked, 'Now see, did you acquire courage or not? After all courage comes with initiative.'

The innocent farmhand was still hesitant. He said with diffidence, 'No, my lady, my limits are too small. It is your courage that has worked for me.'

Lovingly, she corrected him, 'Don't call me "my lady". You are the light of my bedchamber. But you will have to be more courageous. This has to be done now inside my bedchamber and with all the doors open and in front of the Thakur's eyes. Do you dare?'

Unhesitatingly the ploughman said, 'Yes, not even death scares me now.'

The Thakurani then took hold of his hand and began ascending the steps leading to her bedchamber. As she stepped over the threshold of the chamber, she said, 'True happiness comes when fear departs.'

On the other hand, there, in the royal court all pleasure and happiness began to wane under the shadow of an invisible fear. The court was held the very next day, at the appointed time, yet the usual bonhomie was missing. The bard tried his best to make the master of the land and his subordinates laugh, but it was all in vain. Who could laugh when the king did not laugh? The king's stomach was bloated and it ached. To make things worse, he had a sour taste in his mouth caused by yesterday's proceedings. The king vented his ire on the bard who could not make him laugh. Exhausted, the bard finally gave up and said in the end, 'I am done for, my lord! Now your stomach will be relieved only when you laugh on your own.'

The king spoke as if in pain, 'Am I mad to be laughing on my own. Is it for this that I have given you village after village?'

Having said this, he began to laugh involuntarily and the air bloating his stomach subsided. In sheer relief he awarded yet another village to the court poet.

When the queen came to know of this she was distressed. How long would such buffoonery continue in the name of the state! Her mood changed as she heard the neighing of the horses and saw one of the maids approaching. The queen smiled and said, 'I knew it was time to go before you came and have changed into my habit already.'

When the groom saw the queen descending the stairs, the shadow of a smile touched his lips. The queen smiled too. As she drew closer she noted his reddened eyes, and asked, 'Why are your eyes so red?'

The groom bowed his head respectfully and said, 'I can't tell you here, my lady.'

The queen understood what was in his heart. She repeated her question as soon as they were out of the fortified walls of the city. Shyly, the groom said, 'I couldn't get a wink of sleep after what you said yesterday. I have never tossed and turned so much in my life. But the sleepless night gave me more happiness than an empire could. I felt as if I was wide awake and dreaming.'

The queen's heart was filled with happiness. 'What did you do after that?' she asked.

Breathing heavily now, the groom said, 'The flames of the sun in the morning turned all my dreams to ashes.'

'Why?'

'I enjoyed thousand years of happiness in one night and the very next moment it was snatched away from me. How happy I would have been if the sun had died before dawn. How can I get my dream back?'

The queen suppressed her smile, 'Suppose your dream comes true?'

'I can't explain the pleasure that would give me without having the dream actually come true.'

The queen was enjoying teasing the groom, so she asked, 'Tell me what the dream was. How can I make it come true without knowing what it is? Do you want wealth?'

The groom shook his head, 'No.'

'Do you want an estate or an empire?'

'No.'

'Do you wish to marry an apsara from heaven?'

'No.'

'You do not know anything beyond saying "No". Why don't you tell me clearly what you want?'

The groom went red in the face. He dared not look at the queen's face. Turning his face away he said, 'Not everything can be expressed in words. You are a thousand times more intelligent than me. You can understand what is in my heart.'

The queen laughed out, 'You madman! How will I understand without your telling me?'

'I am foolish and uncouth. You are different. Like sunlight, your intelligence has no limits.'

'Why, what is so unique about me?'

'I will tell you only if you promise that you won't be angry.'

'Are you so petrified of my anger?' asked the queen, in a surprised tone.

'But for your anger nothing scares me; not even death,' he said.

'You have become very clever overnight. Why should I vent my anger on you? Tell me, without fear, what is so special about my intelligence?'

The groom spoke as if chewing his words, 'The sun does not discriminate. Sunshine is available to the poor as well as the rich. Similarly your beauty did not discriminate and your intelligence is no less than the sun's light.'

The two mares were trotting along as happily as their riders. In spite of being uneducated, the groom had understood the

queen's heart. He had spent the night uncovering the layers of truth and with some difficulty but he had got the essence of the whole thing.

Disturbed by the trotting of the mares, guinea fowls hidden in the bushes rushed out and flew away on ruffled wings. The groom felt as if the birds had been hiding somewhere in his heart and the queen felt as if the birds had taken flight from between her thighs. They kept on staring at the birds till they were invisible. As their eyes met, their hearts surged and became one. Seated on the mare, it seemed to the queen as if her thoughts too were floating above the earth. She stared at the groom's face and said, 'Today I wish to pay you the fee for the riding lessons. Ask anything you desire.'

The suggestion was clear. Yet, where from would he get the courage to ask what he desired? He turned his face to look at the sun as if to borrow some of its light and fire.

But the queen's face looked brighter than the sun at that time. She said, 'Don't be shy. I won't deny you anything today.'

It was easier to push the Himalayas than to push away one's inhibitions. The groom opened his lips with difficulty as he said, 'I want to drink the water touched by your pink lips.'

The queen burst out laughing. The air itself became intoxicating as the queen's laughter echoed. She added, laughing, 'Express any other wish you have in your heart.'

The groom was opening up slowly. He cast a look at the queen's foot still in the stirrup and said, 'I want to press your fair feet.'

When the amorous desires of the queen could no longer be reined in, she got down from the horse and caught hold of the groom's hand. With the other hand she gestured towards the sand dunes, 'Tell me for whom is this untouched bed of sand waiting?'

'For us,' responded the groom spontaneously. His words seemed to echo all around them.

The setting sun peeped out again and watched the

enactment of sensual desires for a long time. Memories of that hideous bedchamber, that lifeless, golden bed and the ugly, intricate craftsmanship on the ceiling of the palace vanished. How pure was the fragrant air that came through the green leaves! What live softness of the sand dunes! How beautiful was the infinite umbrella of the sky above! At last, the queen felt fulfilled. The sun curtsied to the queen and hurried to meet his beloved night. There wouldn't be any escape for her today!

As the sun set, a new glow filled the lovers' hearts.

The groom was about to brush the dirt from the queen's clothes when she stopped him saying, 'Don't be afraid. These are the precious signs of my immortal love. Only today have I truly become a queen!'

'And I am the king of nature.'

'You know best about yourself. How would I know?'

The groom felt as light as air. He smiled and said, 'How could I possess the world without your knowing?'

The queen joked, 'You've become very wise in the very first instance. Be careful . . .'

'I don't need to be careful of anything now. I've lost my senses completely.'

The words made the queen feel as light as a feather floating in the wind. She nestled closer to her lover and asked, 'Tell me, has the demanding child got the moon or not?'

Staring at her breasts, the groom said, 'Not just the moon, but I hold both the sun and the moon in my hands.'

'Then how will the world be lit now?'

'Why, the world will shine a thousand times more now.'

Feigning impatience, the queen said, 'It's getting late. Let's go.'

Surprised, the groom asked, 'There again?'

'Where else?'

The groom said romantically, 'Let's follow air and sunshine till we reach the end of the earth.'

The queen shook her head and responded, 'No, an escape

would not help. Air and sunshine are present everywhere. I will not find peace till I have cleansed the stinking bedchamber and the dirt-filled kingdom. It's a different matter if you are afraid of the king.'

The groom clapped his hands and laughed loudly, 'The touch of your body has worked magic for me. Now I am not afraid of god himself. Order me, and I can challenge even the lord of death, my lady!'

'It does not become you to call me "my lady" for you are the lord of my heart. One can make the most of life only when one has conquered the fear of death,' she said.

Then they galloped towards the palace. They moved along as if they were floating.

The queen walked fearlessly towards the bedchamber! It was the same as before. A new girl sat close to the king holding wine in a gold goblet. Queens are like kitchen utensils that can be used whenever desired. The newness was in using others' possessions. Lost in his own pleasure, the king didn't ask for any explanation for the queen's late arrival. The maids waiting to bathe the queen observed, 'You are quite late today, my lady.'

Walking toward the bathing chamber, the queen said, 'I am on time, but the day moved faster today.'

The maids took off her clothes in the bath. The lamps glimmered. The queen had never felt her body so beautiful without clothes. She started at the touch of the maid's fingers on her back. She pushed her hand away and said, 'No other touch do I like today. Go away. I will bathe myself.'

'Why, my lady, what is so special today?'

'There is something very special today.'

'Is it not worth telling us?'

'Why shouldn't it be worth telling? It is indeed so special that it should not be told in isolation. I will tell it openly in the court in front of everybody.'

The queen forced the maids to leave and then she began the ritual of bathing with aromatic water. The outer body is

washed everyday, but the potency of the touch of the sand was such that it had washed all the dirt inside her.

The queen fell asleep as soon as she lay on the bed. She dreamt a strange dream that she was weaving a cloth with the shining ray of the moon to beautify herself. The dream went on right through the night. As she awoke in the morning, the rays of the sun became the fibre of her clothes. She was still wearing the same clothes when she called the minister and ordered him to call for an assembly in the court.

Accompanied by the groom, the queen reached the bard's royal home to verify what she had been hearing. Without hesitation she opened the door of the barn and went inside. The Thakurani who did not shy away from telling the truth narrated her story frankly and said, 'I myself wanted to come to you. I am fortunate to have you here.'

The queen asked, 'Where is the bard?'

The Thakurani indicated to the bedchamber and said, 'In there. He is blackening his face with a new girl.'

The queen smiled, 'What is so shameful? This is so typical of men.'

After some small talk the Thakurani said, 'Would you mind if I ask something?'

The queen said sombrely, 'Why should I mind? I already know what you want to ask. In fact the court is being held only for this. By tomorrow our secret will be out in the open.'

'So the story of the groom is true?' asked the Thakurani.

'Not only true, it is more than true. Are you afraid of something?'

'Not at all. For a long time I have been waiting for this day. I am indebted to you for this.'

The queen left and as she entered the walled fort, it looked like a rotten, decaying ripe wound—an open wound that would not dry unless an incision was made.

The king was waiting impatiently for her. He ran up to her asking, 'Why have you asked for the court to assemble?'

The queen said, 'Your presence honours the court everyday.

Let me express myself today and then we shall watch the drama that follows in the court. After all, being your queen, am I any less than anybody?'

'Then, there is nothing to worry about. The minister had scared me for nothing.'

The queen added, 'Why should the lord of the land be scared? The kingdom cannot be run if the king is afraid. You are almighty.'

Pompously the king answered, 'It's true. You can test my power in the court today.'

'It is to test this that I have ordered the court to assemble.'

The court held by the queen's orders was packed with people. They had collected there sensing that something sensational was going to happen. Such large crowds were not seen even on the day of the royal coronation. Sentries stood at their posts with torches in their hands. The king sat grandly on his gold throne with the jewelled crown on his head. The courtiers were seated on the carpet. The queen sat at a distance from the king and next to her sat the Thakurani. Close to them sat the groom and the ploughman. The cleaning woman had been specially summoned.

There was a hushed silence as the queen spoke. Dressed simply for the day she smiled as she turned to the bard and said, 'You are the life of the court. Therefore you have to announce why the court is held.'

Being the quick wit that he was, the court poet promptly responded, 'It is difficult to fathom a queen's heart. I understand the king's heart better.'

'Your wisdom is not so thorough then. If you can't decipher my heart, let me tell you. Listen carefully with your ears open, for such a congregation will not gather again. The cleaning woman has not been awarded justice that day with the suicide of the royal guru,' the queen said.

The cleaning woman raised her hands and said loudly, 'True, my lady. No justice was given to me.'

The queen said, 'Be patient. Today real justice will be

meted out. As all fruits of a rotten creeper are bitter, so all the courtiers of the state are characterless. They are bastards and hypocrites. The royal guru had suppressed his sin for long and when he was exposed, he tried to salvage his reputation by swallowing opium. What do you say, bard?

The bard said softly, 'You know better, my lady.'

'But you are known for your depth of wisdom. Answer my question honestly. Does the woman ever tire of her husband as one does with too much sweet?'

It seemed the bard had lost his speech. He bowed his head and he did not even once look at the queen. The Thakurani, the wife of the bard, stood up to answer saying, 'To save embarrassment to my husband, let me answer the question. Sweet and man both do tire one. Therefore, I admit openly that I have chosen our ploughman as my paramour for a change of taste.'

All the mustachioed men were dumbstruck. The minister offered timidly, 'The ploughman is the bard's son!'

The queen thundered, 'You are right. Nothing is hidden from you. This groom is the seed of the old minister. And I have chosen him for a change of taste. Kudos to these big men who choose their own daughters for a change of taste! Should I present opium to you to try out something different from the daily sweetmeats?'

Now addressing the king directly the queen went on, 'But who will point a finger at you? You are the lord of the land. Therefore you do not have to take refuge in suicide. Yet this crown does not become you anymore. You men have ruled supreme so far. You have thumped your chest saying that king chooses the queen. Today we overturn the saying and say the queen chooses the king.'

Everyone almost stopped breathing when what had only been whispered for all these years was now being said so openly. The stated facts were true, but never before had the truth glared so violently in the face. All those present sat as if they were static marionettes rooted to the ground. No

moustache quivered, no hand reached for the sword in the court that was packed with people. There was a unique, radiant glow to the truth . . .

What could the courtiers, officials and soldiers do when there were trepidations in the heart of the king himself? Each nerve in their bodies quivered. God alone knew what would happen next. All they could sense was that the rule of the debauched king had to end.

The queen proceeded to the throne and with her own hands picked up the king's crown from his head and placed it on the groom's head. The shocked king could not resist. Shivering all over like a puppet he quietly sat down on the floor to keep himself from collapsing. When the owner of the land accepted defeat, who else could resist!

With the queen's order, the ploughman, the bard's servant, took up the position of the minister. It seemed like some goddess had descended in the form of the queen!

With justice having been dispensed, the cleaning woman began dancing with joy. It dawned on the courtiers that there was a new king and a new minister. How becoming and handsome were the new incumbents! The crown looked as if it was specially created for that handsome head.

As if driven by an invisible signal, everyone suddenly started talking. Cries of victory rent the air. Torches burnt more brightly. There was such a shower of gifts to the new king that his head began to swim. He had never even dreamt of being the lord of the land. The sheer magic of the crown and the throne began to intoxicate every pore of his body. His eyes lit up with a new light.

Suddenly, as the new king looked at the queen, something struck him. That neighing of the mares! That untouched bed of sand! That mischief-making and that shameless expression of love! How could one trust a loose woman like her? If she was not true to her own husband, would she be faithful to him? Who knows when such a deceitful and loose woman would replace him with her new paramour as the king! And

look at the shameless Thakurani! How she was laughing with her face unveiled! She did not stop at using her own husband's son for her pleasure. Shame on such a life! Though they were women they had no trace of modesty! Nothing short of the death of these depraved women could save the prestige of the crown.

And all of a sudden, the old king stood up like a madman and approached the queen with folded hands, 'I swear upon this fire that I am not at fault. The entire fault lies with the crown and the throne. I am chastised in this short time. When one has all the pleasures of the world at one's command, one cannot resist the temptation. I speak the truth for the first time that it is not all my fault. The fault lies entirely with power.'

The queen thought awhile and finally said sombrely, 'I know. I took all this trouble just to test this.'

n i n e

kabeer

These heavy, thick scriptures; Kabeera knows how useless they are. The ways of religion; mere corridors through piles of manure and dirt. These places of pilgrimage; Ram and Allah alone can save us from them. The concepts of higher and the lower, the poor and the rich; all lies, black as the night. But when the sun rises darkness is banished and all around there is golden morning. In terms of time, this story is many years old. In the middle of much greenery, there was a village with god-fearing people living in it. There was one person amongst them who was different from everybody else. He had some other name, but out of sarcasm he was called Kabeer.

People used to say that Kabeer was not born of a woman's womb and that he had sprouted from the earth like a wild mushroom. If he had been the offspring of a human being he would talk like one. He had appeared in the village as suddenly as clouds appear in the sky. Though he wove excellent patterns in cloth, the things he said had no head or tail and made no sense to anyone. He had a well-built body and a handsome face but he talked strangely. His ideas were beyond the comprehension of the simple villagers and only he knew where they came from. In spite of being an excellent craftsman his brain did not seem to be in the right place. Just as his hair was dark and unruly, so were the things he said.

The creepers, plants, flowers, bushes and leaves he wove on the carpets, shawls and blankets looked alive. Insects

circled over the woven flowers and sometimes parrots would nip at the fruits woven by him. If only his mind were as sharp as his craftsman's hands! Kabeer's whims knew no limits and so the villagers were constantly at loggerheads with him.

It was as if the stories of his superb craftsmanship were dissolved in the very atmosphere. He was famous throughout the kingdom. Once, it so happened that the king of the land and his daughter, the princess, put up their tents on the bank of the village pond. He had a cavalcade of a hundred and one horsemen. The horses, having been drenched in sweat for a while, got a much-needed rest under the cool shade of banyan trees. Multi-hued carpets were rolled out. When the villagers got the wind of the news, they came to get a glimpse of the king and the princess and pay their respects. The king gladly gave an audience. The princess heard Kabeer's name being whispered in the crowd and she inquired enthusiastically, 'Is this Kabeer's village?'

The people answered that the village belonged to His Highness, but yes, Kabeer too lived there.

'Really?' exclaimed the princess happily.

She ran to her father and in her joy she looked as lovely as the flowers around her as she said, 'It is such a wonderful coincidence that we have unknowingly camped at Kabeer's village. If you permit, I would like to see his craftsmanship.'

Hearing these innocent words, the king marvelled at the princess' simplicity and innocence. The king always fulfilled his only daughter's every wish and she was a daughter whose wishes were worth fulfilling. She was as pure as the water that falls from the heavens as rain. Her beauty was wondrous and her nature beyond all reproach. Her wit was like the endless ocean, and her smile was of milky-white purity. Vexed at his silence she asked again, 'May I?'

The king smiled, 'Why should you bother, I will call him here.'

He turned to the thakur, who stood with his hands politely folded in obeisance and said, 'It seems that Kabeer does not

know of our presence here or else he would have been the first to show us his craftsmanship.'

The thakur was not particularly fond of Kabeer. This was an opportune moment to speak his mind and he promptly answered, 'How shall I tell you, my lord! Kabeer is very arrogant. It will be a wonder if he comes to see you even after you call him.'

A king is a king, the lord of all; he felt a knife puncture his royal ego. To think that anyone would dare ignore his order! Death may spare an offender but the king would not spare one even in his dreams. The king's eyes turned red with anger and he shouted at the thakur, 'Are your mind and tongue in their correct places thakur? What you say and to whom, do you pay any mind to that? This worthless creature lives here unmindful of the orders of his betters, and you call yourself the thakur of this village?'

This frightened the thakur. Death seemed imminent and he blurted, 'My lord, mad Kabeer will not listen even to the gods, what chance do I have?'

The princess' joy waned as she realized that things were getting out of hand. For the first time, she felt her wit desert her. Yet, even more than wit, she had complete faith in her heart. The venomous ego of the king must be contained without delay and flattery might just do it. She came close to the king and said, 'Is there any better connoisseur of art than you? I have heard it from you that artists are a whimsical lot and only a true lover of art can value an artist. You have also told me that artists are incarnations of god. What would these poor thakurs understand anything other than liquor and pleasure?'

The words were like water sprinkled on boiling, jumping milk. Trying to smile, the king said, 'My beloved daughter, I lay my arms in front of your intelligence . . .'

The princess hurriedly answered, cutting him off, 'The little intelligence that I have, is a gift from you. I am nobody.'

The king patted the princess' cheeks and added, 'I know

the worth of your intelligence. You fulfil both a son's and a daughter's roles. Had you not intervened, I would have been responsible for Kabeer's death. Yet, how dense he must be that he does not grasp the ways of royalty! Come, I will accompany you. I am tired of just hearing praises of Kabeer, and it's not right to waste a craftsman's time. My subjects are like my own children. So let's not delay unnecessarily.'

With this the king headed off in the direction he was facing. The thakur hurried to his side, saying, 'Saviour of the poor, come this way. Kabeer's hut is in this direction.'

The king turned around, amazed, 'Hut! Such an artist lives in a hut! This is not a good sign for you, thakur.'

The thakur shivered like a patient with high fever. In a breaking voice, he said, 'My lord, no one will believe the wayward ways of this man till he sees for himself.'

The princess quickly intervened saying, 'Why worry about it now? Soon enough we will know who is wayward and who is not.'

'Yes, why worry about it now?' said the king, full of pride at his daughter's intelligence.

A group of about fifty people accompanied the king to Kabeer's hut. His home was a small temporary-looking shack, thatched with fresh kharia; plastered with cow dung and mud. The courtyard was painted over with folk designs and the cleanliness of the place befitted the gods. Sitting on his usual seat, Kabeer was plying his loom. Pink, woollen warp thread was stretched over the loom and the wooden shaft moved up and down among the colourful threads.

When he heard the commotion at his door, he turned around. He saw a middle-aged stranger with a silk achkan, gold crown, upturned moustaches and gold-sheathed sword dangling on the waist accompanying the thakur. Standing near him was a ravishing girl. Her body was bursting with her youth and beauty. Her beauty made her colourful clothes glow. Her magnificent, doe-eyes sparkled with intelligence.

Kabeer instantly got up with a smile on his lips. He was

staring at the faces around him in amazement when the thakur said irritably, 'Why are you staring like a mad man? It's your good fortune that the lord of the land, master of the three worlds has come to your door to see your workmanship. Now, don't just stare like an owl. Offer a carpet or a shawl to the lord.'

The princess noticed the craftsman before the craftsmanship. He was coppery hued and had cobra-black, curly hair and beard. He wore a white angarkhi over a knee-length dhoti. His teeth were snowy white and he had a cool, pleasant smile. His presence cast a spell and it was because of something more than his physical beauty. Something told the princess that she was seeing man as he should actually be.

Kabeer spoke innocently like a child, 'You have taken the trouble to come here, but I am capable of no work other than weaving. If you consider it craftsmanship, it is your wish.'

Suddenly, the princess heard the buzzing of bumblebees. Some of those insects were hovering over a rose plant. Though green, the plant was not rooted to the earth. Perplexed, she ran to it and when she touched it with her fingers, she realized that it was actually a woven pattern. A few blankets and shawls were hanging on ropes strung across the room. The king and the princess were so enchanted with them that they forgot themselves and began to unfold the shawls and blankets with their own hands. As they opened the folds their eyes were arrested by the scenes woven into the clothes. There were black clouds shot through with real lightning. In some, storms raged and in others, sandstorms blew. Rainbows twinkled in some patterns; the sand of the desert endlessly rippled in others and in one, innumerable red dhalus grew on a green karil bush.

The king, a keen hunter, had good knowledge of the lairs of various animals. When one carpet was unfolded he was amazed at what he saw. He asked, 'Why, this looks like a fox hole? Is there a fox hiding there?'

Kabeer smiled, 'Your observation is so accurate. It is indeed a fox hole.'

The princess asked sweetly, 'What beauty did you see in a fox's lair?'

This was a question close to Kabeer's heart and he responded enthusiastically, 'Everything in nature is equally beautiful.'

The princess could not appreciate the statement. After all what is ugly is ugly and what is beautiful is beautiful. 'What is the difference between ugly and beautiful, then? Who will care for beauty?'

Kabeer responded patiently, 'The difference between ugly and beautiful lies in faulty understanding and vision. You won't believe it, but once passing through a jungle, I saw the hole of a fox. To me, it was more beautiful than the moon. The next day, when I sat at the loom, the den wove itself, exactly like it was in the original.'

The king meditated on this and said, 'I am not too sure about appreciating the actual fox hole, but your artistry speaks for itself. I wonder if god has gifted a part of his own self to you. It is very difficult to reproduce artistically what the eyes have seen. All of us can see and appreciate beauty, but our hands can not replicate it.'

Kabeer shook his head, 'No, no, it is the eyes that are at fault, and that is why the hands cannot replicate faithfully. As for me, when I see an object, my eyes turn into hands and when I sit down to weave, my hands turn into eyes.'

For the first time, the princess felt as if she was hearing a human being speak as he was meant to speak. She noticed that Kabeer talked to them on an equal footing without hesitation. He did not consider people high or low. The environment at the royal court was so different. There jackals, crows and donkeys masqueraded as human beings. They were without any dignity. The princess, ever since she became capable of thought, had been looking for that rare dignity and, finding it in Kabeer, was possessed by a great joy.

Which king would not be proud to have an artist as fine as Kabeer in his kingdom? He patted Kabeer's back and said, 'Blessed are your eyes and blessed are your hands. Jealousy provokes people to criticize you, but now my ears are closed to such criticism. From today the royal treasury is open for you twenty-four hours of the day. You can name your price; don't have any hesitation on that count.'

Kabeer smiled, 'Why should I hesitate? But perhaps you don't know, I don't weave to sell. All traders and rich people have enticed me, but I have never sold my craftsmanship for money. If my heart refuses to do something even in my dreams, why should I, you tell me?'

The princess grasped the essence of Kabeer's words but their meaning eluded the king. The crown and the throne rendered him incapable of understanding. Shaking his head in his ignorance, the king said, 'Yes, yes, there is nothing wrong in this. Why should you sell your goods to anybody when my patronage and treasury are always available to you? If someone even tries to buy from you, I'll have him buried alive. Do you understand?'

The thakur, looking to ingratiate himself, said snidely, 'He was born wise, my lord! He does not need to listen to anyone.'

The king agreed, saying, 'Why should such an artist need anybody's approval. And if you force him to sell, you too will suffer, thakur.'

Then he turned to Kabeer, 'Tell me, has the thakur ever bothered you?'

For a moment, the thakur's blood seemed to dry up in his veins! What a terrible day this was turning out to be! But Kabeer replied simply, 'I can't be bothered by any one. I follow the dictates of my own heart. Don't worry, no one can bother me.'

This answer satisfied the king and the thakur both. The thakur's heart stopped fluttering, but the princess could see clearly what was in store. What a bad idea it was to have

come here! Yet regret was now pointless. It was inevitable that Kabeer would be harmed because of her and try as she might, she could not avert it. A naïve friend could sometimes be worse than a wicked enemy. She writhed inwardly. What conclusion this conversation was heading towards, she knew well and there was no way out.

The king had never spoken at such length with anybody. As soon as he realized this, he ordered his cavalymen to pick up all of Kabeer's work and pay him an advance for further creations. He also told them to come back and pay Kabeer whatever he asked. The men were told not to waste time in haggling over the price of anything and god help them if they did!

With this order, the princess' heart stopped beating and she became breathless. Yet, Kabeer's face did not change in the slightest. The retainers stepped forward to claim the pieces of art when Kabeer, without folding his hands or showing any humility, smiled, and said, 'I have already told you that I do not weave for profit. I regret wasting your time.'

The king now understood all that Kabeer had said earlier. His blood boiled. How dare he! This cheeky fellow! Not quite believing what he had heard the king thundered, 'Am I, like the others, banned from buying?'

What were these knots that she had managed to entangle! The princess kept watching the lips of the statue-like Kabeer and waited to hear what he had to say. Keeping himself from smiling, Kabeer said, 'I have spoken the truth that is in my heart and you are free to interpret it in any way you like.'

The king stamped his feet in anger, 'I have no time to decipher meanings, you useless fellow. Do you wish to die?'

'Death is inevitable. It will spare nobody, neither king nor pauper. I know this, that is why I won't put a price on my labour,' said Kabeer.

The thakur suggested a way out of the crisis. Nervously cracking his knuckles he said, 'If you don't wish to put a price then make an offering of all the things to the almighty king.'

This suggestion from the thakur brought a smile to Kabeer's lips, 'To gift or not is my prerogative. And the king has too much already to be in need of my gifts.'

The princess had heard many rumours about Kabeer and she, to a certain extent, believed them. It was to test the veracity of the rumours that she had wanted to meet him face to face. Yet, even having heard it with her own ears, she found it difficult to believe that someone could so easily express his wishes to a king and thus defy him. Who else but a child would have such a pure heart? Almost as if by magic, the fear she felt metamorphosed into pride and ecstasy. Even death would be proud to meet this man! And after he had killed him, even the king would have no power over Kabeer. So, why fear death; where was the risk in it? Death is certain, yet people fear it. And here was this man, who did not understand anything other than his own truth. Like intermittent flashes of lightning, these thoughts sped through the princess' mind.

But others stood still as if struck by a thunderbolt. Royalty could not accept Kabeer's simple reply—for the king this was worse than being wounded by an enemy's sword. For an instant the shock of the reply left the king speechless. Yet, the very next moment, all the qualities of the snake, the devil and the tiger that lay dormant in him came to the fore and the king bellowed, 'You do not sell, you do not gift, so what good is this craftsmanship of yours?'

Kabeer was not one who would be provoked by what others said, he was wholly self-possessed. He said in the same low tone, 'There are those who need these things, yet cannot buy them. My craftsmanship is for people such as those.'

The thakur added fuel to fire saying, 'How dare you, you low wretch! I am so angry that I could knock your head off even before the lord orders me to. Do you want the lord of the three worlds to beg you for these lowly rags?'

For a while Kabeer stood puzzled. He couldn't grasp the reason for the thakur's anger. The princess turned to the thakur

and said sharply, 'Don't put words in his mouth. He didn't say that.'

When he understood what his daughter meant, the king pulled up the thakur, saying, 'Don't involve yourself in this. Am I not good enough to deal with this on my own?'

The thakur folded his hands up to the elbows and uttered haltingly, 'Your status is infinite, my lord. Millions of such paupers put together cannot harm you.'

The king had wanted to say something else but in his agitated state blurted, 'And?'

The thakur fell at his feet and said, 'Kindly forgive me for the terrible mistake, my lord!'

The king, at that moment, felt as if Kabeer himself, and not the thakur, were lying at his feet. The illusion pacified the king's irritation. He cooled off and tried to cajole Kabeer, 'Stop being so stubborn. Quit this madness. You may have suffered hardship before you met me; now you will live in luxury. My treasury will grant you four times the price you demand. You won't meet a king kinder than me. You madman, a king is like a sire, so why be shy of your own father?'

The king had made an assessment of Kabeer by then. Obviously, he was an unusual kind of man—one who could not be intimidated by power. Moreover, there was no need to put the crown in a weak position in public. The king asked him gently, 'Have you changed your mind? Will you believe me if I say that I have not been so nice even with the king who came before me. Only when you say "yes" will I allow my soldiers to touch the goods. You're a gem of a person and I am proud of you. Feel free to ask whatever price you want.'

Kabeer was not one who would accept largesse from anyone, not even the king. He wouldn't allow anyone to sink their hooks into his heart. Let the king be happy or annoyed, it was immaterial to him. Trying to lay the matter to rest he said, 'I have small needs, so the privileges given by

you are useless to me. I am deeply sorry once again that your visit has been a waste.'

The words set the king on fire. Even after such cajoling, Kabeer had remained thanklessly stubborn. Not quite believing his ears he asked again, 'So you will not sell your wares even for the highest price?'

Kabeer glanced at the princess' face and responded, 'Greed cannot persuade me to change. Ask me a hundred times or ask me once, my answer will be the same.'

It seemed to the princess as if another sun was shining in the sky but the king was in a terrible state. Was he or was he not the master of the land? The dignity of the throne and the crown has to be maintained at any cost and the next instant he ordered that all the woven pieces to be shredded to pieces.

The princess felt helpless and confused as the situation was now out of hand. Yet, amazingly, Kabeer did not protest at all. The lightning woven by Kabeer was reduced to tatters in front of his eyes. The petals of the flowers scattered. Mountains were blasted to pieces. Sand dunes were scattered. What could he do? When it was in his power, his hands always created something new. He did his job; the king was doing his. He smiled and watched the horsemen turning the pieces of his own heart into a heap of shreds.

Kabeer's smile seemed to jeer at the king who shouted with anger, 'What are you waiting for? Cut the shameless fellow also to pieces like his rags.'

As horsemen lunged at Kabeer waving their unsheathed swords, the princess came in front of them and warned, 'Stop, if you so much as scratch Kabeer, I will burn myself.'

The men stopped dead. They could neither disobey the king nor ignore the orders of the princess. Puppets move only when someone jerks their strings. The horseman looked at the king for further orders but it seemed something had stuck in the king's throat. Suddenly he heard the princess snapping, 'What a fabulous price you have paid as a connoisseur of art!'

Live coals burned in the king's heart, but nothing seemed

to affect Kabeer. If Kabeer had squirmed, pleaded and begged, his heart might have softened! And now, his daughter's taunts. He faltered as he spoke, 'He won't sell his things nor gift them so what can I do, you tell me!'

When the princess spoke, it was as if blood dripped from her lips instead of words, 'If you had asked me, I would have told you. There is no way out now. I have learnt my lesson today and I will never ever ask you for anything.'

The king spoke to his daughter in a loving voice. 'You know that there is no evil in my heart,' he said. 'Except for this Kabeer, everyone knows. Look, I will give Kabeer this necklace studded with nine precious gems. It's not more precious than my daughter. Will that please you, my child?'

Sure enough, the king took off his necklace and offered it to Kabeer, saying, 'Let this be the compensation if not the price for your workmanship. This will be enough for you for several generations to come. Are you happy now?'

Kabeer did not even glance at the necklace in the king's hands. He looked into the princess' eyes and said, 'I have always been happy the way I am; why should I atone for the mistakes of others? And in any case, this necklace is no compensation for my loss.'

The king said eagerly, 'Take two or take three necklaces if you want!'

Kabeer smiled, 'A shawl or a blanket does not become valuable by being sold in exchange for diamonds. Its value lies in being used by a man shivering in the cold. You are the king. You don't know the value of sweat born out of hard work. How can you know how hard many people have laboured to create these pieces? When I darn these tatters together to make a blanket and when the blanket keeps some shivering wretch warm will be the day that the true price for this work will be paid and make my craftsmanship meaningful.'

The king laughed, 'You are like a hundred lunatics in one! Do you even know the price of the pearls in this necklace? If

you want to be famous for generosity, you prince of madmen, you could buy thousands of blankets with each pearl in this necklace. You could then sit on a pedestal and distribute blankets forever.'

Kabeer nodded his head, 'I cannot satisfy myself with merely being proud of the act of giving. If I add wealth to wealth, it will increase but all other qualities are lost in the process. Without humanity man is just excreta, blood, bones and skin. Wealth and power cannot be gained without killing, but remember the power of sword and throne cannot intimidate death.'

Drunk with power, the king understood nothing. On hearing the word 'death' from Kabeer's lips, he was reminded that death was inevitable. However, he thought, his case was different—he was the monarch of the land. But he now spoke in a subdued tone, 'Be honest with me Kabeer for I have faith in you. Wouldn't this vast kingdom, the unlimited treasures, the large army, the shining armour, elephants and the cavalry, save me from death? Will I also die like my poor subjects?'

When Kabeer spoke, his smile coloured what he said, 'Is this something one would need to ask about?'

The king sighed deeply, 'I am asking for I need to ask. No ascetic or scholar could answer this question correctly except you. Your words have made thoughts in my head swarm like ants. Tell me, what does this mean?'

When someone posed a query to Kabeer, he had to answer it to his best capacity. He began, 'Even if I try hard, you would not be able to understand it. The throne you sit on, the crown you wear, the treasures you own and the army and the serfs who serve you will keep you from the truth at every step you take towards it. The intoxication of power is a web in front of your eyes and for this you can neither see nor touch truth. It looks like this is the first time that you have a yearning in your heart to glimpse the sparkling sun of truth. Perhaps the swarming ants you feel is that yearning.'

The king agreed readily like a child and said eagerly, 'Yes, it is indeed. Yet how did you know what is in my heart?'

Kabeer looked straight into the king's eyes and said, 'Your heart is not defiled. I can see through it.'

'If you say so, it must be true. But, today I am confused. Is the power of your truth greater than the power authority?' the king asked.

No one had ever asked such profound questions to Kabeer till this day, yet he had no problem answering them. He responded quickly, 'The tiny ember of authority cannot stand before the fiery, bright sun of truth. Unlike a human kingdom, there is no king in the world of truth. Everyone has equal authority. One only needs courage to exert it.'

God knows why, but the king seemed to accept this with humility. He admitted in front of everyone, 'I have been able to assess my courage only today. Kabeer, you may not believe it, but in spite of me being the sovereign of a huge kingdom, you frighten me.'

Kabeer said, 'This is very bad. I don't frighten anyone nor does anyone frighten me. Why would anyone be afraid of me?'

The king moved his head from side to side, saying, 'This only I know or my god knows.'

The courtiers and the thakur were utterly dumbfounded at the things the king of the land was saying. Had he gone mad? How could a kingdom run if the king was afraid? Kabeer must surely be well versed in black magic. It would be better to quickly sideline him. The thakur bent over obsequiously and said, 'Lord, you must eat now; only if you do can the villagers eat.'

The thakur's voice brought the king back to himself. His royal self awakened and his tone changed. He looked at the sky and said, 'Why are the people of the village still hungry till noon?'

The thakur first raised the cry of 'Long live the king' then said with pride, 'Your faithful subjects cannot think of even

swallowing their spit before you have eaten.'

The princess showed a keenness to leave, so the king proceeded towards his camp. Everyone followed him quietly.

What were left behind were just Kabeer and the tatters. The work around him would finish only when he started it. He knew that he would have to set everything right all by himself, so he silently picked up the needle and thread and began putting the torn pieces together. The shreds would get life again through his magical fingers.

Kabeer was immersed in his work, unmindful of time, and light. So engrossed was he that he did not know when the sun set and it turned dark. His whole world was centered around the needle. He was not aware when the light of the sun was subdued by darkness and who lit up the lamp and sat motionless by his side right through the night. It seemed the queen of the night herself held the lamp on her palm. Kabeer came to his senses when with the dawn of the sun, the light of the lamp began to flicker and dim. As the lamp extinguished, what Kabeer saw made him think that he was surely dreaming. He rubbed his eyes to ensure it was the princess who had sat holding the lamp in her hands. Bewildered, all he could say was, 'You!'

The princess did not answer. She kept staring at the pile of darning done by Kabeer. He began speaking in a tone of repentance, 'I was not aware of your arrival or the light of the lamp.'

This time the words tumbled out from the pink lips of the princess of their own volition, 'I do not know myself when I reached the royal camp and when I started back. As I set my foot in your courtyard, I realized that except for the needle and the thread, you were not aware of anything else. I had come to talk about lots of things, but I don't need to ask anything now. Silence is more eloquent. Why waste time, now give me a needle to work with.'

'This work is not as easy as you may think.'

'I'll judge that myself when I do it.'

As Kabeer handed over the needle he had no idea that the princess was a better worker than him. He had given the needle out of politeness, yet with the very first stitch it became clear that her hands could do wonders.

'When did you learn this work?' asked Kabeer in amazement.

'I am going to learn it now because so far I had never touched a needle in my life,' she said.

Kabeer was impressed, 'I can't believe this. Yet how can I disbelieve you?'

Still continuing the needlework, the princess said, 'With a teacher like you anybody could learn anything. The whole night I have been learning how fingers transform into eyes and how eyes transform into fingers.'

Suddenly, she saw the king standing in the courtyard. The thakur and some horsemen stood attendance on him. As his eyes met hers, the king said, 'I knew you could only be here.'

The princess blushed. How could the king have so much patience? He turned to Kabeer and said, 'You would not present a mere blanket to me, but you can't even dream of what I am going to present to you. Guess what it could be?'

The meaning was too clear for Kabeer not to understand. He spoke in a sombre tone, 'I do not offer gifts and don't accept them either.'

The king burst out laughing as he exclaimed, 'This is not an ordinary gift. It is a gift that even god Indra himself would desire. The princess brings the whole kingdom as dowry.'

Kabeer started laughing at the king's mercenary words. Controlling himself, he said, 'Even the dream of such a gift is bad enough. I don't want to be trapped in a marriage; and here, the trap brings the added noose of a kingdom! Do you think I am such a simpleton that I will accept your charity as though it were food consecrated by the gods? If power is such supreme bliss why do you wish to forsake it? Pardon me if you can, but I can't accept this gift either.'

A tremor ran through the king's body. The princess stood

there, utterly humiliated. The golden world of her dreams burnt to ashes in front of her own eyes. This was such a small wish for a princess—who could have anything she desired—to make and it was to remain unfulfilled.

Now, till he had given this traitor a hundred painful deaths, the king would not rest easy. He ordered his men, 'Don't just stand there like eunuchs! Crush the bastard to a pulp—now!' Nine swords flashed up in the air instantly. The princess could stop this, perhaps, but she stood motionless. When the king saw her standing like a statue, he suddenly came forward. He shouted, 'Don't obey these senseless orders of mine. Can't you see how even a single blow would torture my darling daughter? Go away! I seem to have lost my mind.'

The lightning had missed its target and fallen elsewhere! What should Kabeer do? He was at a loss. Then he went to the princess and stood close to her. He took her hand in his own and spoke in a gentle voice, 'One night together is not sufficient to understand each other properly. I have no faith in marriage, children, family and property. The misconception which makes man think that he is superior to other beings is what has created havoc in the world and is still continuing to do so. I don't belong to any caste, religion, race or country. It is so shameful for humans that dead icons rule living beings.'

The king interjected cynically, 'They say you don't even believe in God!'

A sarcastic smile played on Kabeer's lips as he spoke, 'I believe, of course I do. I have my own set of beliefs. God, soul, fate and religion are the greatest hoaxes ever created by man. What could be more disgusting than an intelligent, sentient being bowing down to deities made of stone! I have expressed myself for the first time because you were so inquisitive.'

The princess spoke now. She asked in a sweet low tone, 'Why, in spite of having such knowledge, did you not get angry when your craftsmanship was cut to shreds in front of your eyes and when you had to face humiliation and when

swords were raised to kill you? Why were you not provoked to kill or be killed? Is it that, in spite of all the knowledge you love life too much and fear death? For which day are you saving your anger?’

Kabeer explained patiently, ‘Princess, an individual’s anger is not good enough. It can only be suicidal. The day my anger infects each and every one; there will be no king and no pauper. There will be no high and low, no truth or falsehood, no sin, no virtue, no religion and no irreligion. There will be no rich and no poor and the temple and the mosque will vanish. That day no religions, caste, armies and weapons would exist. By force of one’s power, and by force of the sword no one would then dare to destroy any craftsman’s art.’

The king caught hold of Kabeer’s hand and spoke in complete supplication, ‘It is to repent for my deeds that I wish to give up my kingdom. What more do you want?’

Kabeer smiled softly and added, ‘My wish doesn’t matter.’

The king nodded his head as he said, ‘This is it. If only you would express your wish just once! You do not even care that the princess wants no one but you as a spouse.’

‘I care. I do. A thousand times I do. If the princess agrees to live with me as a woman does with a man for as long as we both mutually agree to be together, I have no objection.’

t e n

the queen of the night’s anger

The sun that illuminates the whole world becomes dull as soon as he enters the queen of the night’s pleasure palace. How futile it is to display the enormity of his blaze and the immensity of his power to his own queen! And an exquisite queen she is! Dark, cascading hair that flows endlessly till it touches the earth and each strand woven delicately with pearls. Her black clothes flutter in infinite space. The arrival of her beloved, the sun, every evening and departure every morning was greeted with a splash of colours. The queen of the night lit up their moments of lovemaking with the moon itself. The sun was used to his beloved’s feeling bad about the daily separation. He liked her sulky self better.

Like every other day, today too was based on the same routine. When the eager sun came to the palace, smeared with the gulal colours of love, he found the door shut. He used the chirping of birds as a way to intimate his arrival. His sulking queen took some time to open the door. Caressing her soft hair, he said, ‘Again the same thing! Why are you annoyed with the lamp? You should have lit it.’

‘Don’t tell me what to do, do it yourself if you want it.’

‘I don’t know how to light it, that’s why I’m asking you. When I see your beauty in the light of the lamp I forget everything else.’

The queen pushed the sun’s hand away as she said, ‘I know

all your tricks. You spend your whole day roaming around and learning new ways of deception. Last night when you wanted me you promised to be back in just about an hour and a half. If you had to come at your usual time, why did you give me false hope?

When the sun laughed, he glowed, 'My queen, I have to take care of the whole world. I wake up all living beings on an empty stomach, but don't put them to bed hungry. They pin their hopes only on me. If I break the rules, their faith will collapse. My day is for all the creatures of the world and for you, my night. Yet you fret so. Taking care of all and keeping everyone happy, I get no time for myself at all.'

The queen's heart began to melt. She asked, 'Do you have to do everything yourself?'

'No, I can't do everything single-handedly but I grant resolve and courage wherever it is required.'

'I don't see any substance in this power granted by you. The labourers, who do such bone-breaking work in your fiery heat, perspiring rivers, barely get a dry, stale piece of bread to eat. The rich, though, loll about on soft mattresses, day after day, enjoying themselves in the shade—they hardly have to face you.'

The sun's glow faded a bit as he said, 'I have stopped caring for man and am fed up with his ways. His ambitions have become sky high. Lost in the ego of his knowledge, he is beyond my control now. I fulfil only the hopes of those birds and animals that depend on me.'

'What hopes?' the queen of the night interrupted him. 'Animals swallow other animals. Today, from my window, I saw a tiger attack a pregnant deer and eat her up. She cried to be spared for her children, but the tiger had no pity for her,' she said.

'This is nature's way. It does not distinguish between life and death. For it, life means death and death means life. I nourish the essential nature of creatures, I do not change them.'

'Where will does not prevail, words are used to satisfy oneself. Do you care for all creatures, even the tiniest?' she asked.

'None', said the sun, shaking his head. 'I bear separation from you only for the sake of these beings,' he added.

The queen of the night challenged, 'And what if there is some creature that is uncared by you—what then?'

'Then I will never ever step out of your palace.'

'Don't brag! I know what your words are worth.'

The sun pulled the queen into his arms, saying, 'If you wouldn't know then who would? You are the only shadow that cools me.'

Adjusting the pearl strings around her hair, the queen of the night pretended to be angry, saying, 'Don't scatter my precious pearls for your idle love.'

'Your pearls are precious because of my love.'

'Yes, this is true.'

And then none of them could keep count of the pearls that were soon strewn around. Next morning when the sun expressed the urgency to leave the palace, the queen kissed his cheeks and said, 'At least stay with me for a day, please. If I were to die today, you would regret going away.'

Loosening the embrace the sun pointed out, 'Both of us are beyond death. If we die, the whole world dies.'

'Stay for just a bit. Isn't my love worth even a little respect?' the queen asked.

'I respect your love, that's why I have to leave now. Even a moment's delay will create havoc in the world.'

Unwillingly, the queen had to scatter the colours across the skies to mark his departure in the usual way. Coming out, the sun smiled and light spread all around.

With one angry tug, the sulking queen took off all the pearls from her hair. She decided that she would test the power of her lover and when he lost, she would not allow him out of her palace.

Soon after making up her mind she thought of an

ingenious trick. She picked up an ant and placed it in an empty kumkum box; then she hid the box in her blouse.

While she waited for him, every moment seemed to pass slowly. Today, she would not forgive him at any cost. How dare he delay coming to her!

The sun grew tired of using the knocker. When she finally opened it, she asked sarcastically, 'Why you are so late today?'

'I have come on time, but my unhappy queen—you still feel I am late.'

'I hope no one has been deprived of your loving care?' she asked in a derisive tone.

'Who would respect my power and energy if I were to be lax in my duty?' responded the sun proudly.

'Enough talk of your power and energy! Why do you make empty boasts?' she said.

Then she came closer and took out the small gold box from her blouse and asked, 'Have you taken care of this little ant?'

The sun smiled as he told her, 'If you have any doubt, open the sachet and verify for yourself—I had put half a grain of rice there with my own hands. There is still some left after the ant finished eating.'

The queen of the night could hardly believe what she was hearing. She quickly opened the little sachet and sure enough she saw a half-eaten grain of rice lying in it.

There was no bound to the queen's amazement and happiness. She sprinkled festive colours all over, saying, 'Now I do not care even if all my pearls are scattered.'

With these loving words she embraced her beloved and the cascade of pearls lasted right through the enchanting night!